

Aconstellations 2017



The Story Of Argus

According to Greek mythology, Argus was a giant with one hundred eyes. While some of his eyes "slept," he kept watch with the others. Hermes lulled Argus to sleep with his magic lyre and slew him with a stone. Upon finding the dead Argus, Hera, queen of the Gods, placed his eyes in the tail of a peacock. The cover of Argus traditionally represents this ancient legend handed down to us by the Greeks. The title was chosen to represent the different views and opinions of readers as though each perspective were an eye of the peacock.



Maggie Harris

Editor-in-Chief

Jessica Cross

Design Editor

Nick Jones

Assistant Editor

Katie Rayburn

Copy Editor

Deanna Sennett

Junior Editor

Dakota Newman

Junior Editor

Shundrika Smith

Junior Editor

Dalyce Williams

Volunteer Editor

J. Andrew Briseño

Faculty Advisor

Acknowledgements

The Argus staff would like to extend a warm thanks to our judges this year: Ginger Hughes, owner at Art a'la Carte (Art), Alfonso Briseño (Photography), Christopher Beard (Poetry), April Jo Murphy (Nonfiction), and Bryn Agnew (Fiction). They chose well.

We would also like to acknowledge our advisor, Dr. J. Andrew Briseño. In his first year as an advisor, Dr. Briseño guided the staff in creating a beautiful edition of the magazine, one that our predecessors and successors alike will be proud of.

Editor's Notes

Inspiration truly comes from strange places. The inspiration for Constellations came to me while reading a passage in a science text book. The passage detailed how constellations are the stories, the history, of the peoples of the world. The same star patterns can be seen by people in different places, at different times, and hold a completely different meaning for each person that looks up at the sky.

Over the past year, the Argus staff has worked diligently towards a new direction for the magazine. We have a beautiful new logo and a fitting new slogan: "Art from all, for all." As indicated in our slogan, our focus is now on making Argus more accessible for our students in all departments. Constellations is all about celebrating the diverse perspectives we have here on campus. Argus is the medium through which students from every background and from every department can express themselves. Art, like constellations, exists to help us find our way. When we are lost, the stars help us make sense of the world around us. When we are divided, the stories we share with our hands and our words help us make sense of one another.

Each picture, poem, and story in this magazine has a bit of someone's history in it. These are the "constellations from Across the NSUniverse". May they guide you to a grand discovery.

Contest Winners

Poetry:

1st place - In Tenebris / Julian Guerroero

2nd place - El Hijo del Conquistador / Joseph Parrie

3rd place - Jazz and Sugarcane / Chantrice Webber

Fiction:

1st place - 5 Minutes / Raley Pellittieri

2nd place - Shaky Existence / Liz Manning

3rd place - Pigeonholed / Nicolas Fry

Non-Fiction:

1st place - A Visit From Ivan / Kevin Pearcey

2nd place - Sunlit Reflection / Rebekah Broussard

3rd place - Smith Family Lore / Candice Smith

Photography:

1st place - Omen / Jessica Cross

2nd place - Ghosts of Patriotism / Maggie Harris

3rd place - Elvis and my Favorite Room / Megan Boyanton

Staff Pick - Panther Power / Sean McGraw

Fine Arts:

1st place - Hands Up / Heather Mathis

2nd place - Memory Of / Richelle Dorris

3rd place - Golden Tree / Heather Mathis

Staff Pick - Orlando / Alec Horton

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Poetry

That Planet (I Can Feel It)

Julianna Carmouche

Isn't it pretty?

That planet that feels so far away.

I know that there's someone there.

I know that they're there.

When they wish upon me,

I can feel it.

Every night,

I can feel it.

I don't know what they wish for,

but I can feel it.

Or why they need a wish,

but I can feel it.

I don't know if their wishes come true,

but I wish for them to.

I hope they come true

because I wish for them too.

Freckled Constellations

Angela Nolen

I used to trace the freckles on your shoulders

And imagined the various constellations under my fingers

Spelled out unspoken secrets and stories

In an infinitely tangled web of strings.

I imagined that they contained words about us,

And I whispered them back to you.

Now when I look up at the stars,

All I can see are those words

Ablaze in bright geometries

Across the midnight sky for anyone to see.

And that's how I finally realize

That they were never meant just for me.



Written by her side

22 April 2016 - Nicholas Jones

For Mom.

Hold me and let me rest,
For just a little while longer,
It's cold and dark out there,
And I'd rather sit here with you,

Tell me about where you've been,
What you've always wanted to do,
And what your dreams were,
When life was still new,

They're telling me to leave,
But I'm not ready just yet,
Because there's so much,
That I still don't know and regret,

Like where do balloons go,

How do I let my anger subside,

And how will I move on,

After you've died,

What does God tell you,

When you pray—and when you sleep,

And while you contemplate your answer,

My heart you will keep,

Wipe the tears from my eyes,

When I look to the sky,

Hoping to find an answer there,

When I don't know what I'm asking or why,

Tell me where you're going,

That you'll save a spot for me,

And how fearless you are,

As you face eternity,

I know now.

He has not forgotten you,

And neither have I.

For the day will soon come,

Where you will spread your wings,

Jump from the mount of olives,

And fly through the air,

Above the clouds,

Touching the sky,

As it passes you by,

And I will cry,

But as the years continue onward,

I will look to the sky and smile,

Every once in a while,

For you,

You told me when I was a baby,

Your baby,

That God would never give me anything,

That I couldn't handle,

But for some reason.

He thinks I'm ready,

To walk down this road,

Without you holding my hand,

So I promise I will try,

But for now,

Please hold me,

While you still can,

Because I'm still your baby,

For just a little while longer.

Dr. Kane's thank You

Kevin Shorter

To the Woman who taught me poetry.

I don't write in stanzas!

I can't seem to remember the difference in simile and metaphor.

And Rhyme scheme isn't particularly what I do.

But I'll make an exception for the woman who taught me that poetry is like a heartbeat. It runs through every vein in my body.

See, simile. Somehow sacrifice seems so small, but you helped me find expression in something so simple.

So To the Woman Who taught me that Poetry can be a doorway to family.

Thank you.

I would have never found that poetry could be so Brainy in society without Acting Stuck up.

See BAPS taught me individuality

you taught me the rest, and for that...

I'll be forever grateful.

Because without you King wouldn't have been seen as royalty!

Dear College

Acquiria Mitchell

Dear College,

Why are you so expensive?
I came to you needing so much
Yet all you did was take away from me

Why do you make me so hungry?

I eat... and eat... and eat...

I spend all my money

Just to still be hungry at the end of the day

Why do you make me so tired?

I sleep all day.

I sleep all night.

I even sleep in some of these classes I'm PAY-ING for

Yet, I. Am. Still. Tired

Why do you test my temper?

These professors asking for extra assignments when I already have 5 quizzes due the next day

These slow elevators when I have FIVE minutes to get to the FOURTH floor

Or these professors going past their 50 or 75 minute cut off and be surprised if I just walk out

Why do you make me realize so much?

That I lost friends when I got here

Or I just realized that they weren't my friends in the first place

That really all I got is me...

That nobody is gonna do this for me...

That the only person that's gonna stop/ me from getting this degree, is me.



Definition

Tyrrielle Doucette

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"No." I told my girls.
```

I never wanted to go out.

"It's just to have some fun."

"Let off some steam."

"No means yes, you're going out!"

So I wore my cute skirt.

I started flirting with some frat guy.

No means Yes, painted on their walls in gold

"You don't look good."

The smile on his blurry face.

I wanted the room to stop spinning.

No.

My lips didn't move.

No.

I couldn't say the words to get him away

I wanted the world to stop fading to black

I should've stayed at home, But...

No means yes, Right?

Perspective

Liza Manning

She's out there somewhere right now.

The woman I wanted to be.

She's hailing a late night cab to meet with her group of friends for a dinner and drink after finishing another successful day as a career woman.

High heels. High class. Everything sparkles around her. The city lights. The glam dresses. The candles on her cake that commemorate the beginning of another exciting year.

At thirty-two she has accomplished so much.

So much that I had wanted.

Instead I look down at my annual vase of daisies and Hallmark card. I eat my candle-less cake with letters hand-drawn in icing. Celebrating what?

Another year in the life of the mundane? Another year of soccer games and PTO meetings? Another year of wearing aprons and baking meatloaf, pretending I know who I am?

As if I'm anything special.

She's out there somewhere right now.

The woman I wanted to be.

She's sitting around a cozy family dinner table with her husband

and kids after finishing another wondrous day as a mother and wife.

Vase of flowers. Hand-picked cards. Love is all around her. Her children's smiles. Her husband's eyes, telling her she is still the one. No candles needed on her cake to commemorate the importance she holds in the world.

At thirty-two she has accomplished so much.

So much that I had wanted.

Instead I look around at the tiring, ever-burning lights and the same meaningless faces I meet every night to avoid loneliness. I eat a tasteless cake with generic candles that will be forgotten tomorrow.

Celebrating what?

Another year of the mundane? Another year of late night drinks and early morning meetings? Another year of overdressing and toting briefcases, pretending I know who I am?

As if I'm anything special.



Always Rachel Lavergne

I never expected the day when he wouldn't be here with me Taking late night strolls Midnight car rides and connecting the constellations

I want to remember everything about him

Every single moment I ever spent with him

I wanted to feel his presence amongst everything and everyone
I ever met or will meet

It seems Mother Nature must have loved him too For I can still hear his laughter echoing amongst the mountain tops and hills

And the rain showering me with soft kisses crying for me when I couldn't myself

The sun dries our teary eyes while painting me an even more beautiful sky

The moon would fill my emptiness at night Waxing and waning, reminding me of his sweet sincere smile As the stars dance and shine revealing to me our shared memories

And a wildfire's bright burning embers remind me of his eyes Such power and ferocity yet only gentle towards me Reflected in the still calm of powerful waters or even in a storm

He was everywhere
He will always be with me
Long after the sands of time wear thin and we are
Nothing more than dust and ashes on this earth, will be together
again.

Never

James Lewis Huss

I never saw true beauty till I glanced Upon the light exuding from your eyes. I never knew to move until I danced Around the room after your first reply.

I never grinned until I heard you quip— Your dulcet sound displaced my inner din. I never kissed until with tainted lips I tread ungainly on your tender skin.

I never felt until my floundering arms
And passions found themselves round your physique.
I never loved till I divined your charms
And fell (unharmed) for your diablerie.

l've three and forty years of nearing death,
Yet ere I knew thee, never drew a breath.

HUNG 12 May 2016 - Nicholas Jones

Put yourself in my place, Hat brimmed towards the sun, Leather jacket and acid wash jeans, Hands pressed tightly against my thighs,

I beam—like a flower child's acid dreams, Like chemistry in a crack pipe, I burn—I fizzle—I break, And I always go back for more,

I'm hung here like a Dolce & Gabbana, A beautiful piece of wear, Placed there—where I harbored your hopes, And captured your dreams with my words,

I'm hung—like a witch in a tree, I scream in pain with neck snapped, Like a twig beneath your swollen feet, And I'm beautiful—but I no longer breathe,

I preach—to you,
That this decision you're making,
Is made from haste,
But why should I waste—your precious time,

You never wasted yours for mine,
So why do I grind my hips,
On once passionate lips,
Hoping you'll cast the line—and reel me in,

I'm hung—where I remind the passers by, Of the misery that lies, Behind the brokenness in our eyes, The truth we both ignore—but despise,

I'm hung—where once we made love, And the light inside you died, You said I hung the moon, But you lied,

It was you that hung the moon, Because the cows are too plump, The dish fucked the spoon sideways, And I'm no longer there,

So I ask you this,
While I'm hung here,
Where do you go at night,
When the silence is too much for you,

Are you hung up too, Like clothes on a line, Forgotten with the passing of time, And why,

Why does it have to be this way, When the sun will soon break the day, And you say you want so badly to be loved, When all you want is to be left alone,

I will never understand,
How you hold such power in your hands,
I'd rather die myself than be hung next to you again,
Because even the devil wouldn't recognize you—and you're his best friend.



An Elegy for Buster

Heather Oswald

Buster

An Elegy

Whoever said that diamonds were a girl's best friend Never owned a dog. - Unknown

He was born a royal—Sir Bartholomew Rufus—but he never let it go to his big ol' block head. Buster, as he preferred to be called, said more with his soft brown eyes than a talk show host with a microphone and an audience. The sensitive man every woman wants, he was a keeper of secrets, a dryer of tears and snot, and the only one to laugh at all of my jokes.

Lover of eggs, cheese, cats and butt scratches; gave love, got love, lover of love.

But don't ask him to get in the lake.

Even a Buster has his limits.

The dark days came and he stayed by my side

Constellations

through the surgeries and the treatments and the vomit.

He passed no judgments on my lopsided, bald headed appearance, content with a weak pat and a whispered "Thank you, Buster."

The years passed as walks were walked, as love and treats and butt scratches were given.

His hair grew white, and his gums turned gray and a decision had to be made.

All the love that he had given in his lifetime crowded into that sterile room.

My sweet old man lay in my lap, content with my heavy-hearted pats and my whispered "Mama loves you, OMB."



Side Notes

Bergen Oge

A footnote
An afterthought
Small side notes in the ridges of your life
What is it called when you write on the
sides of your pages? Along the margins
Fickle and Fleeting
A passing glance in an otherwise
Captivating story

Am I just the text features in your saga? Is my picture over a caption... "Here lies the shell of the girl whose illusions I shattered. She was once a rare species, but now...

No.

I am not.

I refuse.

No longer will I be the devotee of your convoluted schemes.

I will not ride along while you drag me into the depths of despair that I always end up in when we are together.

Now I'm thinking of me. Now I'm using my voice. Now I'm starting over.

Blue Dream

Ashley Wolf

pillow soft, hands cold consciousness slips out the door my particles evaporate god will wipe my tears away

machines whirring, fingers curling
I'm holding on, but it's too late
my brain is only tissue
I love you dear, I'll miss you

I float over icy snow caps until I see the white jungle cat stopping cold in her tracks, her gaze turns my skin to ash

wind is whirring, fingers curling am I freezing or am I burning? now I'm pulling away from my skin like melted wax drips from the wick

I see her face in the snow the child I lost many years ago god will wipe away my tears and give the unborn back their years



Now, I fly into my blue dream
floating over my Blue Pacific Sea
where a white sky blankets the night
and the waves breathe soft and deep
my brain is only tissue
I love you dear, I'll miss you
meet me at the Blue Pacific Sea
god will give us what we couldn't keep



Buffering

Alecia Alford

Expectation, anticipation...

Images scattering

Through the blankness

-white-clear pages-

Of my mind-

Control panel of my soul...

What kind of moment,

What kind of person?

Creatures flutter

Twist & stutter

Hard through my

Insides-

Secrets there & hiding...

Shifty are my thoughts...

As over loaded-I am.

Fit. me in

Your heart-your life...

Reject me not

My heart soul

Cries.

Expecting-

Anticipating-

Scatter my mind

With your maybes

And unintelligible sighs...

As I buffer on...

Bound

Jacqueline Jordan

Lost in the wires; a forgotten past Can't keep up, you're moving way too fast Applying the pressure, going way too deep Up all night, using you, losing sleep You crashed a year later and what did I become? A heart broken in two because our souls became one Intertwined in your existence, becoming way too dependent I put all of my trust in you Snapshots of life, stored in your brain Empty photo albums, still empty, isn't it a shame? I hold you in my hands, even closer to my heart Running to you for answers When did you become so smart? As I grow older, my desire to learn is replaced Built with new features, an interchangeable face I'd be lost without you, if they took you away This Earth couldn't bear it, if you were gone for one day Replacing life lessons, leaving me reckless My, oh my, what a great thing I've been blessed with I was eager to learn, I think I lost that fire Only because my world is lost in the wires Getting caught in the rapture, memories captured No longer using the brain; using you Technology,

Just to maintain.

In Tenebris

Poetry - 1st Place

Julian C. G.

If I returned one day, what must I say to you?

If all I do is wait in the eternal blue?

And if morning does make haste, and night returns too soon,

Shall I forget myself, and blame the fickle moon?

Devotion is not constant, quite very much like love.

It blossoms in the evening, and withers by the dawn. Yet I remain in vigil, another silent stone,

another god forgotten amid the ruins of Rome.

The Heavens do bear witness to my tempestuous soul,

that lived for many winters, abandoned, lone, and cold.

If one shall ask about me,

what will you answer then?

Not but another flower, with nothing to resent.

In shadows you might find me, above, beyond the clouds.

To live among my people, the sentinels of yows.

And if one evening, maybe, concerned with actions past,

you hear me whisper softly your name, then it might pass,

that I have earned my glory among my ancient friends,

with heavenly companions, in time that never ends.

Then I shall keep on waiting, as Orion, constant still,

in the shadows of the evening with a sorrow I must gild.

'Till Cassiopeia, oh my dearest, you return your love to me. For this I'll wait in shadows. For this I'll wait. For thee.

Constellations

Reductio Ad Absurdum Charles Mac Hamilton "Which was to be proved"- Euclid

Occam, have you shaved today,

And seen the monsters fly; or

From celestial teapots did you drink,

Light up, and wonder why?



Through The Flowers Bloom

Arwa Hezzah

And though the flowers bloom, they bloom alone
And though grey clouds cover the wretched sun
And though the wind is still and so forlorn
I find the stillness of it all divine

And though I see the blackbird's song profound

And though I heard its song more times than one
I sit still and in soft echoes I drown

For I have nothing for me now but time

The importance of nothing fills my heart

No troubles seem to cross my empty mind

I'm incomplete, still entirety is my companion

And all the crooked paths seem to align

And though the night is dawning near and near
And though the light is starting to dissolve
I see more light in stars that fill its place
And once again I see the heavens shine

And though I wonder where it all began

And though I understand I'll never know I enjoy all the spontaneity That comes in ignorance's sacred shrine

And though moon light reflects upon the ground
It shows a blind man heaven in his dreams
And though a blind man lacks divinity
He recreates belief within his mind

And though the waves still crash upon the shore

And though the birds still sing their worn-out song

And though the flowers bloom and wilt once more

I see enchantment in their mystery

Meditations

James Lewis Huss

A thought is not a feeling, just a thought— Refine the muddy waters of your mind, Escape your base desire to concentrate, And hear with mental ear the cryptic voice.

Refine the muddy waters of your mind— A word is but an inkling of a thing. To hear with mental ear that cryptic voice, You must dispose your own verbose facade.

A word is but an inkling of a thing,
And things you speak are not reality.
You must dispose your own verbose facade
To break the fetters of the lesser brain.

The things you speak are not reality,
Do not split into sounds the world around.
To break the fetters of the lesser brain,
Those thick linguistic chains you'll need to break.

Do not split into sounds the world around, Resist desire to name your stimuli. Those thick linguistic chains will never break, Unless you first transcend the use of words.

Resist desire to name your stimuli, Escape your base desire to concentrate. Unless you first transcend the use of words, A thought is not a feeling, just a thought.

NightsWillie Soniat.

Ask of me what it meant to be a child

Ask me where I found joy when I found myself in sorrow's clutches.

Ask me where the strength to smile came from when I wanted to cry

Ask this and I'll tell you it comes from my journey into dreams

My quide through fantasy, my escape from reality

Where every weight is lifted with but a tap of the finger, where every boundary seems to be non-existent and I can dance in opposition to gravity

Where I can spin, tumble, run, soar like nothing I had ever seen before

Where the ground can be up and the sky can be down and everything is alive with a playful spirit and an unending energy Where the tree branches become my maze and the sky scraper tops become my stepping stones

Where I can jump to a ball in the sky and push it through the goal at the crescent moon

The dreams where I can land on the tallest tower and twinkle my fingers to play the air like an invisible angelic instrument of my own design

All stop. Captivated to the sound as I play the melody that is pulled from the very core of my being a sound that is the essence

of my soul

I open my eyes one last time to take in all that I see before me
The city, the forest, the bay, the hill, the towers, the snow, the
lights on the ground, in the air, and the sky above

I take a seat on my chair upon the crescent moon in the sky
I look upon it all and remember as it is the very childhood that I
never wish to let go of

Today my inner child still roams this world at the back of my mind When I'm at my lowest I should visit there. If I could I would spend every waking moment anticipating that dream

I would leave the world around me to find myself alive in the sky once again

But I cannot always remember. I cannot always return.

When you ask me what it means to be a child I cannot always say.

But when I remember when I can find my way back I can piece together the chain that pulls open the gates

I will be home once again.

If only for a moment I will know a point of innocence that I have not experienced in a very long time

Whenever I can go back. I will always be greeted by my beautiful dream weaver.

My fantastical, wonderful Nights.

Everything I Loved Was In Pineville

Katie Rayburn

My home of blue-grey walls and endless pine trees

Branched out stretching towards the sky, guarding me.

Wooden porches set to the tune of wind chimes hanging.

Gravel underneath my bare feet, a rough comfort.

Blue skies, White clouds, Green trees,

And the sunshine were all I'd ever need.

Family members all around,

Cooking, laughing, working, dancing, joking.

Pancakes on Sunday mornings, more than we could ever eat.

Summers in the blue waters, hair always smelling like chlorine.

Winters next to the fireplace, hanging socks in the morning for warm feet.

Spring spent watching the flowers bloom and the bees descend upon us.

Fall passed picking up limbs and raking away the straw.

My family, my friends, my dearly loved pets, all of them were there.

He was there too- laughing with me as we fell in love.

Everything I loved was in Pineville.

So I left.

Jazz and Sugar Cane

Poetry - 3rd Place

Chantrice Weber

count the waves in the ocean

hold the breeze in the palms of your hands

cusp the flame of a candle close to your cheeks

harvest a field of flowers through the concrete pavement.

I'm from the city where heartbeats bounce rhythms, and tap dance with jazz feet.

with gumbo veins warmed into these melting pots for hearts,

heavily spiced with the same seasonings our ancestors used in their recipes for love with longevity.

You, just a boy raised with cattle and lips sweet with sugar cane this is where culture connects the dots between star-crossed constellations of long lost lovers held at the distance between the west and the east.

and the moment you can number the tide,

contain the wind without allowing it to slip through your fingers, coddle the fire you ignited

and grow life through the cold asphalt,

that will be the moment you can understand this feeling.

we love with fumbling heart beats, stubborn hands, and bodies so fluid, water can't even mimic.

we paint poetry with our lips, these sheets our canvas, all we want to do is create, ready to take the world by storm either way we'll be happy to watch it grow and blossom into something we will be proud of.

Early Summer 2008

John Wilson

Early summer.

My father and I drive to the feed store to buy seeds for the garden. I search through the pepper plants, springs of green thumbing up from soil cups.

The faint slap of water on the floor under my sneakers.

In my nostrils the delicate scent of morning air and fresh earth.

I almost walk into an old man, his eyes also searching the flats of green.

I stand upright, my mouth already forming automatically the mandatory "pardon me."

Our eyes meet and recognition leaps into our minds.

We shake hands—

His hands recovering some of their strength lost from the long ordeal in the hospital,

A Life's event in the long, slow dance with Death.

We smile-

His mind still sharp, wit finely-pointed, memory clear and lucid.

He takes me to meet his son, who is also at the store.

Upon introduction, we also shake hands-

And he says

"Thank you for taking care of my Dad."

I introduce them to my father.

We speak, we smile, we shake hands again and bid goodbyes.

My father and I make our purchases and go home,

To place plants under the sun,

The delicate scent of fresh earth and water

Heavy in my senses.

Home

Rachel Lavergne

I fell like flames to the sea

Enraptured by something beyond beautiful

Eyes pierced me as icy blue daggers

Shattering my resolve to go anywhere other than where she stood

My past and future self knew her before I even beheld her Cheshire grin

Hair that personified crisp burning leaves in the sunlight

Dancing like threads in the winds of words long forgotten

As I drew closer

I was further enticed by her musky scent of old books, violin strings, and earth

But also imagining the sweet taste of honey and daffodils as our lips met

I could feel the galaxies bursting in every nook and cranny of her mind

Stars constellations comets

Meteors and asteroids

Swimming and crashing beneath her porcelain snow white skin Her soul called out to mine and somehow I knew there would never be a home quite like this one

Impressions

Acquiria Mitchell

I'm tired of it

I'm tired of being seen as an object

Tired of being seen as a piece of meat, because of the meat on my bones

Men coming up and talking to me because my jeans are a little tight, or my shirt is a little high

But as soon as I tell them no, those same clothes that got me approached, get me called out of my name.

We have to stop judging people based on the clothes that they wear.

First impressions are important, but they should never be the last

I'm tired of reminiscing

Remembering all the times people told me I wasn't going to amount to anything

The times I was to blame for something I can't control

The times people assumed something about me because somebody else told them.

A First impression is better than no impression

And it should never be the last

You could be missing out on a friend that would never turn their back on you or cross you up

Memories that you will remember for a lifetime

Or even the love of your life that you will have Three kids and two dogs with

But you'll never know

Cause you think they're boogie, stuck-up, or high maintenance Or somebody told you something about them that you just don't approve of

But have you made that next impression?

Have you even made the first?

El Hilo del Conquistador

Poetry - 2nd Place

Joseph Parrie

Two in the morning, Mexico City, ring crew pulls into the docking bay. Workers arrive half an hour later. getting an early start on the day. I pull in around four o'clock, running on three hours of sleep. Alongside back issues and stomach ulcers, I feel a headache start to creep. Tonight, a gate of twenty-thousand will show up to scream and cheer for the man known as El Hijo del Conquistador, the luchador that shows no fear. I, however, fight in the undercard, long before the marks file in. Right after the mini-estrellas, I'm booked to fight El Delfin. We start the show by five at night, half the crowd having taken their seats. The rest won't show up until the main event, even less stay for the meet-and-greet. I walk to the ring amid a chorus of boos, some beer bottles shooting past my head. After what I said in a promo this morning, the crowd really wants me dead. Delfin shows up, bathed in blue light,

looking like the eponymous creature.

Though our match is smack at the bottom of the card,

he makes it feel like a main event feature.

We go fifteen minutes, a basic match,

with rest-holds to break for television.

After dropkicks, suplexes, moonsaults, and planchas,

our match ends in a no-contest decision.

Backstage, the promoter commends us

for warming up the crowd so well.

Listening to the audience still at a low-hum,

their enthusiasm is pretty hard to tell.

Still, I take my money quickly,

my next show a thousand miles away.

Though my pay is about five hundred dollars,

it's enough to see me through the next day.

Something is off when I open the envelope

that night, in a hotel near the border.

Instead of five hundred bucks like I expect,

I count twenty-five Benjamins in order.

Later that week, home in Dallas,

I hear the news from a fan.

El Hijo del Conquistador shot the promoter

for shorting him on payment again

Right Handed Freedom

Dakota Newman

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, And to the republic for which it stands, One nation under God, indivisible, With liberty and justice for all.

I pledge allegiance to the ideology of the United States of America,

And to the injustices for which it stands, One nation disembodying God, unabashed, With stereotypes and inequalities for all.

I vow my ambitions to the cut-throat market system of the United States of America,

And to the job market by which it stands, One capitalistic government dignifying people, unashamed, With self-profit and deficit for all.

I give my tax dollars to the United States of America, And to the policies for which it stands, One failed system after another, indistinguishable, With neglect of education and health care for all.

I lay down my self-worth to the mass media of the United States of America.

And to the insecurities by which it causes, One body image to shame the rest, unachievable, With self-hate and risk for all.

I adhere to the racism of the United States of America, And to the notion that one skin color is superior, One race to dominate culture, inexcusable, With prejudice and discrimination for all.

I pledge allegiance to the flag.

Home Grown Fear

Katie Rayburn

Reason to Riot and a Right to Reason In a world beyond reasonable explanation. Do not put that loaded gun in my hand, All the shooting and looting and dead men proclaiming That their justice is righteous, only makes me nauseous. Bombs are now the natural necessity of those willing to die, While I just want to watch a movie without fearing I'll die, And the truth of it all is that we don't want to die. So why is death all we see? The news brews new catastrophe, one after the other, Perhaps prompting another to create a scene. Or maybe the news only shows what it knows, And the blood baths are an accepted development, But it is not one I am willing to accept. When our country and people should be rallying and strong, We're torn apart and scattered, as though our neighbors don't matter. Because the real truth is, no terrorist could make me more afraid than My own country already has.



The Sin is the Dying

Charles Mac Hamilton

Words are still the principal instruments of control. Systems predicated on universal literacy operate thought through mass media which are uncontrollable, self preserving—supplemented with deception and persuasion.

Convinced that it is a cooperative enterprise, but concealing actual intentions from underprivileged citizens: who will protect them from themselves?

Force subverts the power of money, controllers forced to make concessions, but we can take back censorship and your economic stimulus checks if we want.

It owes itself to needing NEWS to survive, except for "top-secret" research.

Daddy Warbucks and Uncle Sam are kissin' cousins, what matters is that a lot of people believe it and put the state ahead of the individual. "Support Our Troops," you unpatriotic sonofabitch.

Those who obtain power are the least competent to use it.

Did dinosaurs ever worry about this stuff?

Let's get Congress to eat their own eggs—mistakes imply intention.

Astronauts aren't looking for more space, they're looking for more time, and then there is no way back. We move from religion to science as it has more promise for immortality—the sin is in the dying, not the living. As long as we're alive, we are saved.

I am right because I am not dead. I'm so important that I must live forever.

Face it-if you are other people and other people are you—we call it "visiting."
Like T.C. Boyle ripping off "Admiral"
from Rorvick's "In His Image,"
cloning does away with the "me machine."

Dreams are a necessity for all warm-blooded animals—immortality is prolonging the future.

Dreams involve time travel, train the being for future conditions, complete freedom from past conditioning is to be in space, the next frontier. We call it "visiting."

And just in: Gertrude Baines, the world's oldest person has died at age one hundred fifteen.

To Be a Viking

Kevin Shorter

The sweetest nectar comes from flowers that don't belong to you Honey suckle syrup sliding from lips secretly attempting escape It's okay....You weren't invited to this feast but tearing away at this meat is the most fun I've ever had

No need for dessert, the screams escaped swine before it had even died

The blood stained table cloth reminded us this is what it means to be Vikings

you take what you want, this is what it means to be a man, you take what you want this is what it means to be hungry....

you need to curve your appetite

quenching this insatiable thirst is no small task

So I apologize for being a man in a band of thieves....

Trust no one because you'll never know when I want to come back for seconds.

You ever wonder what it's like.

Let me explain, it's like being there for someone

but never knowing what it's like to be by their side.

It's the curse of being a Viking at the feast of the ages,

You'll never know what it is to not be hungry,

And you will never know,

When you'll want seconds!

Torrent

Shundrika Smith

I'm sure you never realized this, but
You cut me deeply with words, fleetingly
Spoken sarcastically, invoking a well of
Hatred to simmer inside my veins, unrelenting
A torrent of disparaging critiques burst my pride
Until my self-esteem matched New Orleans in
Depth. I became nothing worth mentioning or
Remembering, ghosting through the best years
Of my life discontent with everything. Quiet
Was my friend because it could not speak
Against me, a comforter when the days dragged
And my mind nearly snapped from the strain
Of not living, breathing, or eating. You cut
Me deeply metaphorically, until I dreamed
Of slicing away the unwanted parts of me.

God Bless America

Willie Soniat

God bless the country that started out as a few houses on stolen land

The land of freedom and prosperity for those willing to take it from others.

The land where I can worship as I see fit so my god is the only god allowed in it

God bless America

The country that fought for freedom in every fight they could get their boot on the ground

Running straight forward without ever looking back

The country that saw fight after fight for the right to be an equal member of the communities that we call home

The country where people struggled to be allowed the freedom preached about for centuries

God bless America

The country that accepted all people from every walk of life

The country that built itself on the shoulders of every man and

woman willing to work for it

The country that saw destruction for the sake of terror and chose to stand together for peace

The country whose name washes through the dreams of all those who wish for a better life for the ones they love

God bless America

This country that knows its past isn't clean and its present isn't perfect

The country that sometimes makes you question is the path to unity even worth it

We scream for a call to arms against ourselves

Those who preached equality and acceptance now want to watch men burn at the stake

Those who wanted peace with their oppressors now hunt those same men like dogs

Those who wanted to spread hate now celebrate their victory
We are making the dream into a nightmare

My friends this isn't social justice

This is the melting pot melting itself at the seams and it seems the people of my country only want to feed the fire with the desire to watch it all burn

God bless America.

God help America

Langston Hughes and the White Man's Blues

James Lewis Huss

How would Langston sing the Blues If he were in a white man's shoes?

Would he scream, "Don't tread on me!"
While taking others' liberty?
Would he cry oppression when
His symbols of oppression end?
Would he say your gods were fake
Before he bowed his head to pray?

How would Langston sing the Blues If he were in a white man's shoes?

Could he tap out beat by beat
The beatings that avoid his streets?
Could he really syncopate
Without experience of hate?
Could he still make rhythm work
Not knowing how it feels to hurt?

How would Langston sing the Blues If he were in a white man's shoes?

Would he claim there's honor in
The treasons of his Southern kin?
Would he keep that lie alive
That war was fought for states and rights?
Would he wash from history
The blood of chattel slavery?

Nah, Langston wouldn't sing the Blues If he were in a white man's shoes.

Katt The Fish

Kevin Shorter

I thought it was cool the way you'd swim with me in the store around and around your bowl you went.

It's crazy—I thought we'd be friends forever

So when I brought you home I put your bowl next to my bed...

It was so you'd know my thoughts kept me as trapped as you were,

Always swimming around and around!

Stuck in an endless cycle that feeds into itself,

I thought you'd live forever... I just forgot I needed to feed you—

And that forever never truly lasts that long
you only lasted two weeks



Austra et Luna

Julian C. Guerrero

You will not see her in the banquet laughing,
Pouring light from her golden shroud.
Beauty is her transparent veil,
And virtue what makes her proud.

You will not find her in the somber dusk,
Adorned with laurels, as her noble crown;
But treading softly, as my heart must,
Waiting calmly for her golden dawn.

And if I see myself in peril
Of losing her among the stars,
Then I shall sail my argent vessel,
To claim her back as my soul sires.

Now I can't find her in this morning, Perfumed in rose, nor dressed in silk. Her image fades above the sunlight, My torment born, my sorrows spilt.

But you might find her, in the evenings laughing, Pouring light from her golden shroud.

The stars are now her precious veil,

And virtue is what makes her proud.

The One Who Yawns

Joseph Parrie

Stone-faced, tired-eyed, a lifetime of survival weighing on your brow. Immortalized forever in the image captured in a flash of light and powder. But what do we not see? The entry-wounds from the guns of the intruders, mostly in your back, because where else would a snake strike? And how they struck, offering peace in one hand and a bullet in the other. First they tried over a river, and then in your own home. And how they hate you even to this day! That they name their other enemies after you, because "free Apache" and "terrorist" are one in the same to them, if the color's close enough. We knew better. We see today what you saw a century and a half ago. We lose ourselves more and more. Our pain is a slow burning one. But it burns on a wick, a wick that inches ever so closer to a powder keg of fury, generation after generation of anger, unleashed. If you were here to see it, it would've been all too familiar, like you had never left that patch of grass. A momentary lapse of time, a century in a snap.

They called you a criminal, a menace.

They believe you to be dead.

We knew better.

We know better.

Significantly Insignificant

Katie Rayburn

For those "disappeared" Chileans and the generations after

A foot left in a shoe, only the foot

Bits of bone and pictures

Skeletons on display

Belonging to the past

They called them the "disappeared"

Out of reach yet always in sight

Such an interesting thing

Calcium in both bones and stars

Those bodies of warmth too far away

Light that cannot reach the earth

Memories written in streaks and dots

In the waves of the sky

Stars, endless, eternal

Taught to observe

To preserve the memory

To search for the remains of loved ones

Recyclable matter

In the absence of something else

Asking questions we cannot answer

Answers we cannot accept

Problems seem insignificant

Significantly insignificant

Unique to everyone

Why would we want bones?

Dating Profile

James Lewis Huss

Looking for someone to:

- Watch my bags while I'm in the airport bath
- Rub lotion on that place between my shoulder blades
- Ignore me while I play karate
- Fix my tie
- Laugh at my puns
- Let me finish her plate when she's done
- Watch cheesy films with me
- Feign interest in my fight stories
- Think of us
- Hold my hand
- Pretend to like the Wu Tang Clan
- Read my poetry
- Be my muse
- Brag to her friends of sweet things I do
- Kiss me when we say goodbye
- Love me till the day I die

Joy Comes in The Morning

Dakota Newman

I hope you burn in the pits of Hell, Where you belong. I hope the flames lick your soul, Over and over again.

You will cry to me for help But I will leave you there, Standing among the flames, Melting into oblivion.

Consumed by the rage of Sin.
You will be lumber,
The fuel igniting the brimstone around you,
Suffering for all eternity.

You will be left screaming in agony, As you die again and again. Lucifer will be the only angel there, With the ability to save you.

He is no longer the Sun of Morning,
Fallen from his iniquity,
Transmogrified into the Devil,
Lucifer will revel at your bleeding.
There will be no sunrise,
To chase away your demons,
Your eyes will burn from the smoke,
Ash will coat your lungs.

Water will drip from my fingers.
Onto your singed skin.
Relief will be fleeting,
And the flames will be quick.

I'm casting you back to Hell,
To drown in the Lake of Fire,
Fire and brimstone end my addiction,
Lust is no longer my affliction.
Moon's Departure
Arwa Hezzah
As sun once more illuminates the sky
As light encumbers all that once sat still
As moon bids darkened silhouettes goodbye
As air begins to fill the airless passages
The night is killed

Another morning orders men to rise
Another temporary fantasy
Another case of obscured demise
Of night's per Diem departure
By morning's will

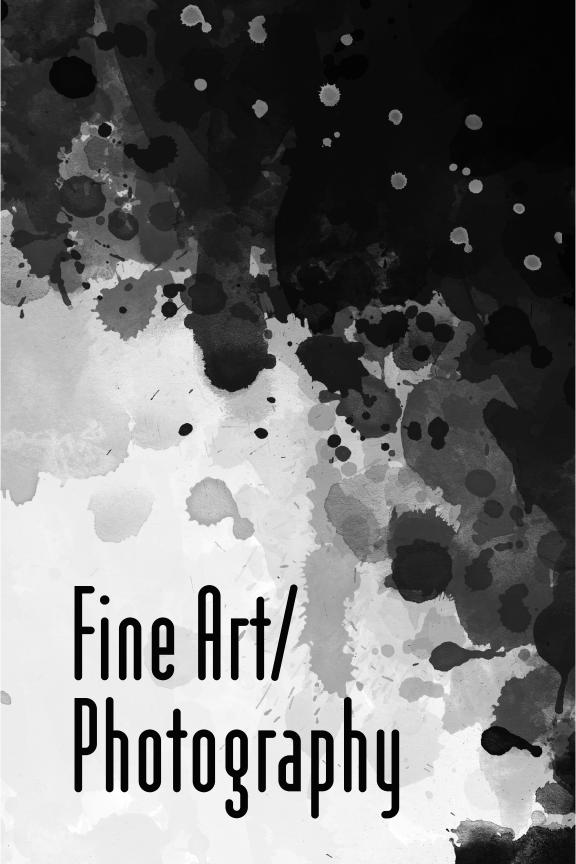
A certain interruption of man's slumber

The lights cast by the sun anon provide

And yet no man has ever stopped to wonder

Why moon so quickly leaves the world he watched

To a different god.



Omen

Jessica Cross



Photography - 1st Place



Hands Up



Fine Art - 1st Place



Ghosts of Patriotism

Maggie Harris



Photography - 2nd Place



Memory Of

Richelle Dorris



Fine Art - 2nd Place



Elvis and My Favorite Room

Megan Boyanton

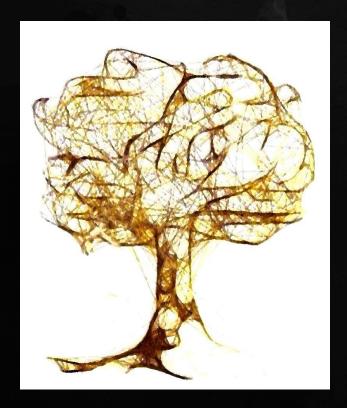


Photography - 3rd Place

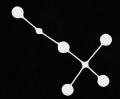


Golden Tree

Heather Mathis



Fine Art - 3rd Place



Panther Power

Sean McGraw



Photography - Staff Pick



Orlando

Alec Horton



Fine Art - Staff Pick







A Night At The Circus

Charles Mac Hamilton

At midnight, in late spring, I watched two skinny young men with shoulder-length hair stand at the bar and order a continuous flow of tequila and lemon wedges. They wore dark blue work shirts that boasted "World Color Press," the town's largest employer. Their fingers were stained yellow and blue from Marlboro's and ink. The one on the left dropped his cigarette, trying to light it. As he lowered himself to pick it up off the sawdust floor, I overheard him say, "No man, she's lyin'. It's twelve months MAX for a C-section." The man closest to me shrugged and shouted, "Nurse! Two more shots!"

Four hours earlier, one month to the day after I had decided to leave the place for good, I walked into "The Circus" to make a call on my past. The bar had once been a radiator shop. But now the building's only connection with a vehicle is the late night dents and scrapes caused by drunk drivers stupidly trying to find their way home. I finally felt confident enough to re-enter the place. But I knew that this night would be different, although I didn't exactly know what to expect. Tonight I was coming to be entertained—as a spectator, not a participant. My previous role had been to tell jokes and spend lies. My bar bill proved that.

Once in the door, I grabbed a wooden stool and sat down at the long green bar. I noticed one or two roustabouts wearing "Caterpillar" caps. They nodded at me. This crew sure doesn't

believe in recruiting from the outside, I thought. Almost everyone in this show was a "B & R," translation-Born and Raised.

"Big Dog! Proud to see ya, bud." It was Danny, the head "ringmaster". "Ain't seen you in a fly's life. You didn't retire or nothin' didya? Where ya been keepin' yourself, Missoura?"

"Yeah, Dan," I answered, "had to, the pace was killing me—or else go crazy." I paused for a moment. "It's good to see you too, though," I said.

Danny wiped the countertop with a fresh white bar towel. I noticed that he scrubbed at an imaginary stain and kept his eyes focused on it.

"Buy ya a drink?" He looked up and raised his eyebrows.

"Yeah. A coke. Make that a Diet Coke," I answered.

Danny's face shrunk. He bent down to get the soft drink, and I reached into my pocket for a crumpled dollar bill.

"Sure miss ya around here. Ain't been the same since ya left," he said.

"Thanks, Dan. I miss you guys too," I assured him.

"Just here to say 'hi' or are ya stayin' for the show?" Danny asked, setting my coke on a round cardboard coaster.

"Both," I gulped, "just thought I'd see what it looks like from a different angle."

"Might get crazy," he warned, "the Rams has got a home game, and ever'one is gonna be pumped if they win." He leaned over the bar and stuck out his open hand.

"Hey, I gotta go get everthing ready, talk at ya later. Robin'll take care of ya. And tell her yours is on the house."

My face lit up. "Thanks, Danny, but you don't have to do that," I said, releasing my grip from his.

"You kiddin'? As much bidness as brung in here it's the least I could do. Ever decide you wanna come back, love to have ya."

Before I could answer, Danny whirled and disappeared behind the glass-enclosed refrigerated cases that housed the cast's liquid refreshments, their props.

Danny was a good guy. In the countless hours we spent drowning our sorrows and lifting our spirits, we had discovered that we were fifth cousins. But he was wrong. It was the same. A month, five months, ten years. It would always be same, with me or without me.

Over the next couple of hours, I took advantage of the

Iull. There were no familiar faces yet, other than the Caterpillar guys, so I decided to make sure I had myself a suitable seat for the action. The arena was not large, just slightly bigger than a couple of average-sized living rooms, but I wanted to be able to see everything. My choice was a square table in the farthest recessed corner of the room. I slouched down in the chair and looked around the dungeon-like pub.

I had squandered a lot of time and money here. I was surrounded by deep, dark Irish-green walls. They didn't take anything from the staged, depressing atmosphere that was perfect for aspiring performers. I noticed that my hands were shaking as I drank my coke. I leaned back and closed my eyes, inhaling deeply and slowly exhaling, counting to ten each time. I recognized the familiar odors of stale smoke, draft beer, and frygrill grease that hung in the air and clung to the walls. I suddenly felt my stomach turn over, and my mouth felt sticky and dry, in spite of the soft drink. My hands were still shaking. I fidgeted for over an hour, trying to divert myself by alternating my attention between the Cards-Cubs game on the big-screen TV and the local "rag."

"Register News," actually. The headline that day read "ORGAN BANK OVERDRAWN." I amused myself by thinking that someone had better get down there quick and make a deposit before they charge him an arm and a leg-or something. But then I felt a lump in my throat and moisture in my eyes as I pondered how my own liver had almost become "overdrawn" in this very place.

Over the muffled voice of Mike Shannon, I heard the CD jukebox blaring out Patsy Cline's "Crazy" and "Gimme Three Steps" by Lynard Skynard. Every few minutes, Robin, the show's much-traveled and career hostess who was born with one leg shorter than the other, hobbled up to my table.

"Hey, Big Dog, still love me?" she asked.

"Sure, Robin. Are you ready to go steady yet? You know I'm as free as a bird now." I teased.

She placed a clean, chipped ashtray in front of me and mourned, "Nah, me and Fitzie is still shackin' up. I don't think he'd go for that too much. But you could ask him though. Need another coke. Babe?"

"Yeah," I smiled and watched her limp away.

Around nine o'clock, I heard the whoops and hollers of victory as the crowd began piling in. As they came through the door, I mentally cast each of them as an acrobat, juggler, clown, trainer, or ringmaster. By day they disguised themselves as bankers, factory workers, secretaries and retailers. Tonight, however, they wore their masks.

The acts began to unfold before my newly-opened eyes. And after each one, my jaw dropped a little lower. The first one featured a tall, gaunt, fragile girl named Tammy and three Chevy salesmen. The salesmen wore Sans-a-Belt slacks and short sleeved white shirts. Their ties were removed and collars opened. They were engrossed in a game called "Horses", played with dice and for dollar bills. The jukebox was blasting out B.B. King's "Caledonia" so I was able to only faintly hear bits and pieces of their colloquy. The oldest of the quartet was a balding man around fifty named Lee. He wore compound spectacles and was cursed with a loud voice that honked like a duck. Lee was a car veteran of over twenty years and was pretty well respected by everyone in town. I always found him to be comically mesmerizing, so I listened carefully. ".....so the guy turns to me and says, 'how dare you fart before my wife?' and I told him I was sorry, but I didn't know it was her turn," he quacked.

The others roared with laughter and slapped their open palms on the table. But Lee wasn't finished. He pointed to the fleshy area on his brow and asked, "If this here's my forehead, would this here be called my foreskin?" More slaps and laughter.

Bud, with jet-black strands protruding from his nostrils and horn-rimmed glasses to match, shot back, "Yeah, I guess that's why Judy is always calling you 'Dickhead'." Good one, I chuckled silently. But I quickly lost interest when they returned to their game, dice in one hand, Bud Light in the other.

I started watching the doorway. The man I saw there was six-foot-two and was lucky to scale 160 pounds. His face resembled an eagle's, and his Harpo Marx haircut was more gray than black. He wore bright green slacks and a white pullover shirt

with "Palm Springs" embroidered over the pocket, that made his bronze skin appear even darker, and black and white oxfords. I immediately recognized Tom "Pencil" Williams, forty-one years old, eighteen hour a day imbiber, gambler, sports fanatic, and local entrepreneur. He labored diligently to impress himself.

"Pencil," everyone cheered as if it were "Norm!" "Wadya shoot d'day?" someone asked.

"Eighty-five," he scowled. I knew that meant ninety.

"But I got screwed a couple a times and missed four birdie putts inside three feet. Goddamn course is in terrible shape. Won two hunerd though. Hey Danny, get everbody in here a drink on me."

Pencil saddled up to the bar next to an attractive and robust woman. Midge was twenty-five, but looked forty in the daylight when I used to see her in the drive-through at the bank.

"Great looking dress," he complimented. His eyes focused on the short hemline of her floral strapless sun dress.

"This old thing?" Midge asked in mock horror. "Hey Tommy, I wanna ask you something," she said in her husky voice. "Me and some of the girls were talkin'...I really wanna get your opinion on this. Would you throw your pet off a twenty story building for a million dollars? I told Karen and Pam you wouldn't, cause you're so sensitive. I know you talk tough and everything..."

"Goddamn right I would," he interrupted, his eyes darting around the room in quest of an advocate. There were more nods from the Caterpillar guys.

"I'd throw my grandmother off for a thousand, You can buy a hell of a lot of dogs for that kind of dough. Hey, Midge. I got one for you. What do a thousand abused women have in common?"

Midge giggled, "Oh, Tommy."

"They just won't listen," he delivered firmly.

"Oh, Tommy."

He stood up from his stool and nudged it closer to her. He placed his tanned arm on her naked, milky-white shoulder.

"Midge, did you ever notice how different black people are from white people?"

"Tommy, hush," Midge warned. Alarmed, her eyes quickly scanned the room.

No one protested his bigotry however, so she persisted in giggling at everything he said. Then, fifteen minutes later, the cocky xenophobic chauvinist and the lonely, desperate money-changer were out the door. End of act two.

Over "Stairway To Heaven", I continued to listen to the various groups that had gathered. I was fascinated as I watched them carrying out their roles and uttering their well-rehearsed lines. Among them, fragments of tall tales about jug fishin' and frog giggin' from bearded men clad in blue jeans, flannel shirts and cowboy boots, everyone of them. I was particularly interested in a grossly fat character named Marty. He rested his chin on his chest and drank beer after beer after beer. Every now and then, almost on cue, he piped in and slurred, "Yeah, I knowed a guy that eat one." The roustabouts had joined his table, and I heard these local sages bellow out the likes of "Yeah, I had a cousin who'uz in Nam," and "Yeah, my brother done screwed her wunst," or "I was hornier'n a two-peckered billy goat." I rolled my eyes and thought, what words of wisdom.

The main event, however, was right in front of me. It featured my old friend Randy Kent and a small, golden-haired girl. She had robin-egg eyes and looked like a fairy to me, but hardly twenty-one. I remember someone calling her Kim. She was barefoot and dressed in white tennis shorts and a silver-sequined halter top. Kim amused herself by chomping bubble gum, chain smoking Virginia Slims, and drinking Kool-Aid wine coolers.

Randy was forty-two but looked ten years older due to the black wrinkled baggage around and under his beady, red/ green eyes. But he was still a pretty handsome guy and boasted a full head of thick and curly, dark brown hair that matched his mustache. His nightly countenance was betrayed however, by his rude demeanor, which was quite different from his daytime disguise as an insurance agent in his father's business. Randy actually spent more time at the Elks Club—where he dropped a cool hundred a day in the poker machines—than he did in the office. "I'm out schmoozing, out drumming up business," he'd tell Martin Kent, who did not approve.

Randy claimed to have slept with over a thousand women. But I never saw him with even one. I thought he was hilarious, even when he was sober. He used the strangest terms to describe things, especially when he was trying to pick up women.

"Sweet baby, I think you're real pretty. You give me a semi-erectile peenoid. Would you like to come home with me tonight and meet Big Ol' Richard?" he'd croon to the bar floozies, to no avail.

Randy's eyes were narrow slits from reaching his daily quota of fifteen Miller Lites, five at the Elks, five at the golf course, and five here. He predictably lit Camel after Camel. He rested his face in his left hand and his elbow on the table, and allowed the pixie to ramble on. He nodded as if she were quoting Shakespeare. My eyes grew wider and wider as Kim charmed herself with her verbose, nasal twang.

"Yeah, I ain't workin' right now, but I'm tryin' to get Danny to take me on here. Or else I might go the community college next fall and take some nursing classes and shit. Me and my mom come here all the time. You ain't seen her have you? I seen her about an hour ago when she come in....maybe she's playin' darts with them guys in the back. Oh well, she'll be alright. You think she'll be alright, Randy?"

She lit a Slim and shifted her weight to curl a size 2 under one of her tiny, half-visible cheeks before going on.

"My mom done took most a her business courses-she wants to be a notary, but she can't finish yet cause my old man got throwed in jail for non-support and shit. And she had to go back to work at Denny's."

"Well, I'll be durn," Randy managed, sinking lower and lower into the table.

"Yeah, I guess I could get on out there but I'd have to work third shift, and then I couldn't party and shit. Maybe I'll try Targets or Wal-Marts. We was gonna go out dancin' later, but I told her we was comin' here instead. Hey, I seen you last night though."

"Well, I'll be durn."

"Yeah, me and my girlfriends seen you out there with Tommy, but you didn't see us. We was dancin' and shit, and partyin' hardy! Them guys in the band is really good, played a lot a Seeger and shit, and me and Tiffany got 'em to play 'Mony Mony' twice. I love that part where everbody yells, 'Everbody here get laid, get fucked.' It's just a sayin' ya know, none a them guys really mean it when they say it and shit. But we seen two girls dancin' a slow dance, and me and my girlfriends was callin' 'em lesbos."

She could have said, "Randy, your grandmother just died," and his response would still have been, "Well. I'll be durn."

"Well, I'm gonna go find my mom and go on out there. Are you-uns comin' out there later, Randy?" she asked.

"Yeah," he muttered, then laid his head on the table and closed his eyes. Kim picked up her full bottle, the token of Randy's seductive generosity, and rushed off to find her mom... and shit.

Well I'll be durn, I mocked to myself. Can you imagine that?

I learned a lot about people when I lived there—how Merle Thompson wouldn't give that nickel to see a pissant eat a bale of hay, and that Shirley Brown's face would make a freight train take a dirt road. And I learned that a good hard rain sounded like a cow pissin' on a flat rock, and that most of the folks there would rather have a good hard rain than win the lottery. But most of all I learned to drink.

After I left "The Circus" that night, I knew I would never be back. I was an outsider now. The music sounded louder. I didn't get most of the jokes. And it was much smokier than I ever remembered. I have heard the apologies of men and women with trembling hands and blood-shot eyes, telling me that what they did the night before is not how they really usually behave. But I have never heard the same after a night of compassion, tenderness, spiritual union, and sober bliss.

THERE IS A COLOGNE CALLED POLO

FOR THOSE WHO WOULD SMELL OF HORSES

THERE IS A FEMININE PAD CALLED 'ALWAYS'

FOR THOSE WHO CAN'T WAIT FOR IT TO END

THERE IS A DRUG CALLED ALCOHOL

FOR THOSE WHO NEED AN EXCUSE

When I arrived home that evening, it was two a.m. It was a long drive back to St. Louis, and I had time to gather my thoughts and put "The Circus" behind me. It was dark when I walked into my apartment. I was happy and expectant. All in all, it had been a good day. I checked my email and saw nothing in the inbox; and I knew that no one had been thinking of me. And I cried as I got into bed.

5 minutes

Fiction - 1st Place

Baley Bellittieri

There's a baby crying in the next room over. I can hear the unpleasant sound through the thin hospital walls. It makes me want to scream.

Where is the mother who should be comforting the child? Why hasn't she shut it up yet? I just want to go back to sleep.

I force my eyes shut as I roll over to face away from the shrieking.

After what feels like forever, the crying finally stops, but the peace only lasts for five minutes. A second burst of painful bellowing is shouted from the baby's small lungs.

At least I had those five minutes, I mumble to myself.

My eyes slowly open as I look at the empty hospital issued basinet by my bed. Only a tiny pink blanket remains in the otherwise empty crib.

Tears form in my eyes as I softly whisper into the silence of my room, "At least I'had those five minutes."



Pigeonholed

Fiction - 3rd Place

Nicolas Fry

Catherine, I've decided that I no longer wish to be an active player in society. By that I also mean I no longer wish to be human, in fact, I will become a pigeon. No, do not weep for me, I have given this a lot of thought. I will shed my clothes, liberally apply glue and feathers, have a friend spray me grey, and I will proceed down to the nearest park. One that has an older lady who, by some miracle, has a bag of bread crumbs she slings out to the dumbfounded flock before her, my dumbfounded flock. She will not be alarmed by my presence, mind you. She will be soothed by my gentle "cooing" and spastic twitches of my arms, now wings.

Why be a pigeon? Well I imagine it is a simple and modest life. One such life that is free of all mundane responsibilities, yet close enough to modern civilization so that I won't feel as if I've become Amish. Perhaps you might visit me on weekends. I'll be in the tree over the Westside parking lot, the one my boss always parks in when he walks his dog. My direct purpose is to ruin the interior of his convertible with what I expel from my cloacae. Which I do not have at the moment. I mean, can't quite be a pigeon without one. I'll need you to call your ex-boyfriend, the one you always remind me about, the one that does plastic surgery. See if he can retrofit on a few bird-like appendages. I'll

take that look of shock as a, "We'll see."

Right, forgive my digression, I meant to tell you why I want to be a pigeon. Life, as of late, has become more and more bothersome as the days go by. Civil unrest, Blink-182 made an album we didn't want, social media is plagued with Kardashian wannabes and guys playing golf, as if it wasn't the most boring thing in the world. My mother keeps telling me about her really god-awful party dips that will surely put her into a diabetic coma one day. To top it all off, people bicker back and forth in any setting over any trivial matter, much like at the coffee shop yesterday. You were busy ordering a venti frappe-cappa-mochaplease-pour-in-a-pound-of-sugar-decaf-nocaf-whatever-the-hell, and I was busy watching two young men argue over who was a better vegan. It was pointless, it's all pretty pointless. So I'll take my chances as a pigeon.

As for my previous life, tell my wife I love her. No not you, the other one, Catherine stop crying. Yes, of course I mean you, put down the phone and stop trying to call my therapist. Sell my car, and the kids if you want. Tossing away everything I have in this life for the life of a pigeon is not that big of a deal. I've simply given up. I've accepted that no matter what I do I will never achieve true freedom, I'll slave away for a dollar bill and get spat upon in return. Every day will no longer have a strict routine that I work myself to death in and I won't pace around a cubicle cage until the stress kills me. I'm electing to becoming a pigeon, because being human just isn't worth it anymore.

Shaky Existence

Fiction - 2nd Place

Liz Manning

She crushed up the third pill of the day. Under the pressure of the razor blade, its solid form transformed into a pile of glorious, white dust that made her think of the wispy clouds in the sky she had loved watching as a child. Reaching for the nearest short piece of straw as quickly as her shaky hands would move, the dust made its way skillfully into her fiending nose. Eyes closed, she breathed in what was her life force as methodically as she'd done hundreds of times before. Tasting the drip at the back of her throat, her body collapsed backwards onto the couch and blindly reached for the pack of menthol lights. The flicker of the lighter celebrated the beginning of a good high, however long it lasted.

After lying under the spell of a mindless, euphoric sensation for twenty minutes, she was jarred back to reality by the piercing sound of the baby screaming. Her latest attempt at escape had been denied too quickly. She had hoped in vain that the needy body would sleep at least an hour.

As the excruciating, evening sunrays poured through the broken living room blinds and into her eyes, she stumbled her way across the floor, tripping over the random piles of dirty laundry that blanketed it. Down the small, dim hallway, she reached the room where the child was. Before opening the door, she braced herself. It wasn't that she hated the baby. She really did love it. But she just couldn't figure out how to fill all of its endless needs. It always required something.

She remembered having a puppy for a brief few months when she was eight. After countless piles of shit had been hopelessly scrubbed into the carpet, and nights of lonely howling penetrated their house, her parents had rid her of the responsibility. The baby needed so much more than the puppy.

Opening the door, she saw the restless ten-month old standing ever so wobbly in its crib, gripping the wooden slats as if they were the iron bars of a jail cell. Its eyes nearly matted shut from the tears it continued to produce and the residue of its short nap. She walked over and aimlessly plucked it up. Its wailing slowly subsiding as it realized her presence. She held the little body as one would a forced burden on a long journey. The urine-filled diaper created a large wet spot on her shirt. One of the reasons for all the stray laundry.

She carried the baby with its damp, heavy bottom back into the living room where the two spent most of their days in front of the TV. Looking down she realized the razor blade was still on the coffee table. "What could have happened?" she wondered. "What would happen, eventually?"

Looking around the cluttered room she thought what she did every day. This was no place for a baby. Her eyes glanced into the small dining room/kitchen area where the table and countertops became a filthy landfill of dirty dishes with leftover remnants of meals. A fly buzzed around a small, glass jar of halfeaten mushed pears. There were so many things to do in a day, and she was failing at all of them. Well, at least the baby was alive. But for how long in this place? How long, with her?

She put the baby into its bouncy seat crusted with old food and gave it a bottle of old formula that it hadn't completely drained before its short nap, hoping to buy enough time for another cigarette. She took the baggie of pills out of her pocket and counted them again and again, muttering as if trying to break an uncrackable code. She was looking for the solution that would allow her one more cloud-like experience today, while saving enough to make it through until next week. She had experienced days without them. Refusing to go back to that hell, she instead

chose the pain of rationing.

the last few drags of her menthol.

She thought back to the day that she found out she was pregnant. A result of another faceless hookup at a random party. At seventeen she had to make a decision. Give the baby up for adoption or become one of many single mothers. Her parents told her there was no third option. She remembered hearing the voices of her parents and friends. Ones that encouraged her to brave the exciting world of motherhood. They had told her that it would be okay. Maybe even good for her. She had heard promises that she would have help. That she wouldn't be alone. As she sat there staring at the child with its smoke filled lungs and a look of abandonment on its face much too complex for its tiny mind to comprehend, she wondered if she had made the

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She stood lifeless, staring into the foggy mirror of her dorm's community bathroom. The reflection was beginning to look like someone else. The glazy eyes surrounded by dark circles belonged to someone she had known as a child. The woman who had given birth to her. She had sworn those eyes, that face, would never be hers. Yet here it was, glaring back with a dreaded, familiar emptiness. This couldn't be happening.

right choice. Overwhelmed as usual, she sat back and inhaled

After spending most of her childhood living with a woman who cared more about snorting the next pill than a child's fragile life, she was finally rescued out of the dangerous situation. She wondered how she had never died of accidental ingestion, or worse, with the substances and paraphernalia her mother left carelessly lying around their disgusting hole of an apartment. How had she existed in that dangerous environment for so many years before someone realized how unfit her mother was to care for a child?

Growing up, she had promised herself she would never do drugs.

Unlike her mother, she succeeded in avoiding both drugs and teenage pregnancy all through high school. She was now twenty, and had been in college for three years. Although she had broken her promise by consciously experimenting as so many college kids do, she didn't have a problem. It was just fun. Parties were a stress relief and something she enjoyed before real life began. She had been able to pass all of her classes and was on track for graduation the next year. She was succeeding. So, why was that face staring back at her in her mirror?

She looked down at the plastic stick on the sink. Two long, anxious minutes had produced two short, unwanted lines. The familiar face in the mirror looked more horrifying than ever. Overwhelmed, she tossed the stick into the trashcan as if ridding herself from the truth, and quickly made her way out to find a party.

The next day as she was walking across campus to her afternoon class, she hesitantly veered into a building that she had only visited a couple times for initial paperwork during her freshman year. Cautiously she continued down a fluorescent-lit hallway, passing several busy offices until she stopped in front of the door of the counselor's office. She had never been here, but remembered a forced visit to a psychiatrist's office after the removal from her mother's custody. The nosy shrink had asked her the same questions over and over until she wanted to crawl under the couch. She didn't want to go through that again. "Why am I here?" she wondered.

Staring through the slim window, she saw an unfamiliar woman sitting at a desk in an empty waiting room. The woman was preoccupied with a phone call and hadn't spotted her reluctant presence at the door. She could easily walk away. She could turn around and run straight out of the building. Go on to her class as if nothing was wrong. But then what? The double lines were still there somewhere in the trashcan. The hated face was still in the

mirror.

Although her casual, college highs came from a different poison than the one her mother had chosen, she knew they were happening much too frequently. During the last three years, she had told herself she had everything under control. College was supposed to be a little wild before real life began. But she had been ignoring that her hands sometimes became shaky, just like the ones that rarely held her as a child. Looking down at those hands she realized what she'd known for a while. What the plastic stick and glazy eyes in the bathroom confirmed. She wasn't doing it for fun anymore.

She had to make a decision. Push the door open and seek help. Or walk away, and likely become her. She thought back to those darkest days, wishing she didn't remember so much of her childhood. And that woman. The one that was always sitting limp on the couch with baggies of pills, surrounded by the toxic smoke that suffocated her. Even after her mother was no longer her caretaker, the woman's deteriorating face haunted her between their infrequent visits. She refused to do the same to her child. Breathing in so deep it hurt, she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

That Moment

Bergen Oge

You wake up to the aroma of fresh coffee and mom's homemade biscuits. You sneak into the kitchen to watch her, gliding along and singing with Nina Simone. Light-footed and Free. Unaware she was being observed, you watched in awe that morning. Free of constraints. Free of demands. Being her true, uninhibited self. In just two weeks she will get the news. She won't tell the family right away, doesn't want to upset them. It is stage 4 pancreatic cancer, she says without pause. You sit in shock for weeks replaying that moment. When you finally wake up, she's gone.



For Every One

John Wilson

Madelyn was a treasure. She was beautiful in the classical sense, her face gently almond-shaped, surmounted by luxurious locks of auburn that cascaded curls past her shoulders. Her figure inspired desire among men and equal parts envy among women. She was educated, well-spoken, and literate, able to carry on intelligent conversations in almost any topic and hold her own in even the most spirited debates when opinions differed. At the same time, she was gracious in her interactions with everyone, treating all—rich, poor, kind, and boorish alike—with the respect and civility that one would accord those of highest social status. Yet, for all of her beauty, wit, grace, composure, and kindness, she was alone. She was young, in the prime of a life that she was eager to share with some special someone. But she could not sustain a relationship. A single flaw weighed upon her very life, a millstone holding her back from meaningful companionship.

She had bad breath.

It must be clarified: bad breath is simply the most basic of descriptions that could be given with mere words. The term itself implies an inconvenient malady, one which, perhaps, might lead to occasional mild embarrassment. Madelyn's breath, however, was no mere affliction. It was a force of nature. A burden of interminable gravity. A curse from the blackest Stygian depths

of Hell.

It was perhaps the cruelest fate that she could have ever suffered, to have been so gloriously blessed in so many areas, yet yoked with such ignominy as to be separated from the rest of humanity... she was a beautiful, delicate pariah.

As a child, she suffered the bullying and picking of her peers. In the classroom, she frequently had to move her desk to the doorway of the classroom, and, frequently, into the hallway to allow for ventilation. Perhaps her isolation contributed to her brilliance in all other ways, as she submerged herself into books and learning as a means of compensating for her lack of friendships.

In all fairness, it should be considered that no one had ever had such a severe condition as Madelyn. By the same token, no one else had ever encountered such, and so their reactions were unfettered by the decorum that might have been gained from experience and understanding. This was not simply bad breath; it was not even the more clinically-labelled halitosis. No, Madelyn's breath reeked. It blistered the very air with fetid rancidity. It downright stank. Words failed to capture the essence of the stench, as one would have to experience it to truly appreciate its horror. Without exaggeration, those who would have described the scent as similar to that of a water buffalo, dead after a weeklong feast of rancid garlic and spoiled limburger cheese, mired in the thick, black mud of the African veldt, rotting under the hottest three days of sun that that

continent has ever known, bloated and flatulent with the gases of decomposition and its last meal, would have been too kind.

The offensiveness of it all wasn't even limited to the human species. She couldn't have pets. She had purchased pedigreed dogs, but it was only that much more expensive when they finally escaped, chewing through their own collars to render return to their owner impossible. Many of the dogs would go under or over the fences. Some would feign running to the door in excitement at her return, as most dogs do—but this was actually in order to build momentum in a bum-rush to freedom. One hound, rescued from the pound, actually raced back to the scene of his confinement, pawing open the door of the gas chamber and climbing inside after only two days of exposure to her curse.

Her cats would climb up out of the chimney. The tropical fish would float belly-up, faking their own death so as to gain the freedom of the sewers. The odd gerbil or hamster learned from watching the fish, and eventually managed to flush themselves to freedom, as well.

There were no strays in Madelyn's neighborhood. There were only animal refugees.

She tried so many things to rid herself of her malediction. There was no mouthwash, toothpaste, cream, salve, unguent or industrial buffer that she had not employed in her quest to be free. Under the advice of an East Indian holy man she contacted on the internet, she had once begun plucking and eating the

blades of grass from her lawn on a daily basis, believing the raw chlorophyll she obtained in this manner might help. In the end, this resulted in several phone calls to various public agencies being placed by her neighbors, leading to no end of embarrassing investigations and explanations. Besides, it only sped up the loss of her lawn, which, due to her condition, required complete resodding every year.

Through it all, Madelyn soldiered on. Through online studies, she learned enough about business and finance to become a shrewd market investor and acquire no small amount of wealth. She employed the internet at great lengths to contact possible suitors. The distance afforded by the computer afforded some degree of safety, a buffer wherein she could be heard rather than smelt. Eventually, though, if all went well through such electronic communication, the progression to a face-to-face meeting was inevitable. The very thought filled her with an odd confluence of hopeful joy and crushing dread.

Such meetings, should they develop, typically took much planning on her part. She had located a nice restaurant whose management would allow reservation of the entire establishment for an intimate dinner for two, and whose staff were cordial and cooperative with Madelyn's particular needs. She would arrange the meeting on nights in which business was slow, and be waiting for her potential suitor at the table when he arrived. The prearranged meal would then begin: a tantalizing appetizer, followed by a fresh salad, a masterfully-prepared

entrée, a delightfully delicate dessert, and finally a spiced coffee or rich port.

It was usually around the time of the entrée being served that her companion, who was understandably persistent in his quest for verbal exchange, would finally ask a question that she couldn't answer with a nod or shake of the head, or a shrug, either of which she could accompany with a shy smile. And when she would finally speak, the reaction of her dates was curiously consistent: a violent backward jerk of the head, as if being struck with great and sudden force; a curling of the lips in unbelieving revulsion; a shudder ramming itself though the entire body, sending violent tremors through every extremity, usually coupled with the awkward motions of the legs trying to push the chair away from the table to air; and, finally, the merciful loss of consciousness as the young suitors would go limp and slump onto the table, the bluish pallor of their faces oddly complimenting the etoufee. She was never able to enjoy that damned dessert.

The wait staff were prepared through prior notice and the experience of repetition. Within ten seconds of her date's loss of consciousness the portable oxygen tank was wheeled out, the mask placed over his face, and he was placed in a rescue position on the floor until it was ascertained that he still had a heartbeat and regular breathing. Then, a waiter would assist her in getting the young man into his car, which Madelyn would drive back to his residence. The waiter would follow in his own vehicle and, after helping to get the young man safely to his bed

in his own home, he would drive Madelyn back to the restaurant and her own vehicle. She would email an apology the following morning, and that was the end of what had only hours before had been a promising new relationship.

With each repeated restaurant encounter, Madelyn's loneliness grew with her desperation. She had heard it said that there was someone for every one on Earth, but she was beginning to realize that she may very well be the lone exception. She was nearing the end of her rope. While she never considered suicide, she had retained the phone number of a particular South American surgeon who speculated that he could cure her or her malady through an experimental surgery in which he would remove her tonsils, half of her soft palate, her uvula, four sinus cavities, thyroid gland, nose, a piece of the frontal lobe of her brain, and one eye. As extreme as it might have sounded, Madelyn was getting closer to making the ultimate decision, even sometimes tracing the digits of the number on her phone's keypad.

And so it was that on yet another evening, the waiter was driving her back to the restaurant after another failed attempt at companionship. Madelyn sat in silence, mentally dialing the number on the phone and making a list of what to pack.

"Would you like to listen to some music?" the waiter offered, shaking her from her mournful reverie.

Madelyn looked up at the young man at the wheel. Suddenly, she realized: this was the same waiter that had

provided his assistance and the use of his vehicle on each and every one of these dating disasters. Yet he never seemed the worse for wear at any time.

She nodded mutely. He tapped the button on the car stereo and soft music slipped from the speakers around them.

Moments slid by with the stripes on the road before them.

"You don't talk much, do you?" he enquired.

Madelyn slowly, cautiously, opened her mouth to murmur "I guess it just depends on who I'm talking to."

"Oh," came the reply. No twitching. No blackout. No loss of bladder function. "So, your dates? Or boyfriends, maybe? What about them?"

She gathered her courage. "I guess they just didn't like what I had to say," she responded, voice a little louder, stronger, surer.

He turned his head toward her for a moment and smiled. "No," he said, his head shaking, "I guess not."

Madelyn was silently amazed. Had she somehow been cured in the last few minutes?

"How long have you been working at the restaurant, anyway?" she asked, wanting to prolong the conversation as long as possible.

"About four years now. Mostly part-time now. I was full-time, but had to cut back my hours for school. I'll be graduating in another four months, so I'll be turning in my notice before too long and going on to other things. It's been a good job, though."

"What are you studying?"

"Chemical engineering. Planning on working more in the industrial side when I get out. Are you cold? Hot?" He reached one hand toward the air conditioner dial.

"No, I'm fine." She turned in her seat to face him directly, speaking in a conversational tone of voice. "It sounds pretty interesting, what you're doing. Do you focus on anything in particular in that field?"

"Mostly industrial solvents. Not a lot of people going into that area right now, so that might help me get a job pretty quickly."

"It sounds like that might be dangerous." She was relaxed now, but still dumbfounded at how easy it all was, how natural.

"Well, yeah. I guess you can say that. But if you're careful, and respect the chemistry and follow the precautions and all it's not bad." He scratched his cheek absently. "Only one thing wrong."

"What's that?"

"Well," he said, tapping his fingers in time to the soft rhythm of the music from the radio, "After all this time of working around solvents and corrosives, I lost my sense of smell."

And for the first time in many years, Madelyn remembered how good it felt to smile.

FINIS

We are on fire

Katie Rayburn

For a moment, just a moment, I was caught outside with a blue sky and white clouds, and I felt the warmth of the sun on my cheeks. I felt the tingle of the heat on my skin, comforting. I thought to myself how beautiful this day felt, and I heard the rustling of the leaves, dry leaves crackling on concrete.

Suddenly, I was in a war. The crackling of leaves burning instead of rolling in the winds, the scorching heat no longer a comfort, only an unbearable burn. Coughing began in my throat, I could not breathe. Then I heard it, the flapping and furling and whipping of the flag on a pole, but I did not hear the clink, clink of the metal. All I could hear was the sheet flapping against itself in the terrible wind. The sound made only by a strong and unbreakable fabric beating against itself over and over again.

I thought to myself that this is not a safe world; this is a battlefield, and we are on fire. I wanted to scream, I was suffocating. The world I knew was no longer mine. Instead, I was afraid as people around me took no notice. Everything was on fire. My throat was hoarse. I could hear it. I could feel it. I could almost smell it. Why did no else stumble in fear as a war raged around us, burning, destroying, killing.

Then, I blink. All of it—the fire, the burning, the dread of war—was gone, replaced once more by the blue sky. Once again, the leaves only rustling along the concrete. And the clouds, white clouds, were no longer the smoke from battlefields. They were simply clouds. The flag was waving in the wind, proud and peaceful. And I wondered, why I had not noticed the value of peace before. But I was wary still. Even as the feeling had departed, I kept asking myself, "Are we on fire?"

Non-Fiction

Smith Family Lore

Non-Fiction - 3rd Place

Candice Smith

The Smith family lore has been obtained from Claude Smith, my father, the youngest son of Iona Smith and Raymond Hart. The exact origins of the Smith family are unknown. The oldest ancestor known to the family is a woman named Nine. The reason behind her name could not be explained. There is only speculation. Her name is only one interesting fact about my family. This is only one memory. Claude provided many stories about his childhood and the beliefs of his older family members.

One of the clearest memories Claude has involves his brother Alvin "Rock" Smith. Alvin was the oldest of the three Smith sons. When he would return from school, he would have to walk from the main road to his home, which was on the Woodland Plantation in Port Sulphur, Louisiana. The path from the road to the house was over 150 yards and encircled the property. As he would walk the path, he would hear footsteps behind him. There was never anyone within sight when he looked back. This supernatural experience occurred regularly for years. The most vivid supernatural event Alvin experienced happened at night. He was running around the property, training for his track team, and he ran toward the main house. On the upper porch of the house, he saw a woman with a dog, staring off into the distance. He immediately ran back toward his home and broke the door

off its hinges in his rush to get to safety. Once he was in the house he passed out, and his mother had to give him sugar water to revive him. Alvin was able to see spirits.

Alvin experienced supernatural events during the entire time he lived on the Woodland Plantation. Once he no longer lived on the plantation, he never saw or heard another spirit. The Smiths genuinely believed that he was able to see the spirits that haunted the area. Once they learned the history of the area, these supernatural events were more understandable to them. The family did not know that the Woodland Plantation was a former auction site for slaves and that many people died there. When Haywood Smith, Iona's father, moved his family onto the property, he thought it was a regular plantation. He did not know the painful history of the area until Alvin started seeing spirits, and then they decided to do some research. Alvin was not the only one to experience and believe in the supernatural. Claude witnessed a white cloud near an old cypress tree on the property, and it appeared and disappeared at random. He has never been able to explain what it was he witnessed.

The belief in the supernatural was the product of a larger belief in voodoo and other forms of witchcraft. Iona Smith was a fervent believer and practitioner of voodoo, as were her ancestors. She would travel to New Orleans to consult voodoo priestesses and fortune tellers. Her belief affected many aspects of her life. One example is her volatile relationship with her neighbor Rosie. After consulting a woman in New Orleans, she

believed that Rosie had "put a spell" on her husband Raymond Hart. The woman who lona consulted told her that the spell Rosie had performed was the reason Raymond was "drinking and ripping and running." Rosie was also accused of putting a spell on the laundry hanging on the line outside. In order to stop Rosie from harming her family, lona devised a trap. Claude distinctly remembers assisting his mother with the set up of the trap. The kids took some string and two wooden stakes and ran the string across the path that led to their home. Then they sprinkled flour onto the path. The trap was designed to catch Rosie or anyone else who attempted to come near the house. Since Rosie could not walk well, the string would have tripped her, and the flour would leave an imprint to show if someone had fallen in the trap. Unfortunately, I do not know if the trap worked.

In addition to voodoo, the Smiths practiced herbal medicine. One time, almost every family member contracted the flu. Haywood went to the levee of the Mississippi River and collected elderberry leaves, along with some other unidentifiable plants. He boiled the plants into a tea and forced everyone who was sick to drink it. Within days everyone was in perfect health. The event has been compared to the work of a "witch doctor."

There was more to the Smith family lore than ghosts and voodoo. The family also spoke of legends they knew about Plaquemines Parish and their neighborhood. Claude told legends about T-Jack, a Sugar Cane factory, and a treasure chest. T-Jack was a legend told to children. He wandered in a certain area

near the Mississippi River. Children were afraid to say his name or go near his rumored haunt because they feared he would harm them.

The second legend was about Sugar Cane factory in the area. The old owner of the factory was very "stingy," so he buried his money in the factory walls. However one day, the factory caught fire and collapsed on itself, but the money may have been salvageable because it was hidden within the brick foundation. The old man looked for his money every day until he died, but he never found it. The foundations of the factory still stand in the woods today.

The third legend is about a mysterious chest. A big chest was chained to the rafters of the main house on the Woodland Plantation. Everyone believed that there was a great treasure hidden inside, but no one could remove the chest from the rafters. One day, Haywood stopped by the house, and the chest was gone. No one ever knew what happened to it, or what was hidden inside.

These stories about magic, ghosts, boogeyman, and hidden treasure are fascinating and fantastical. Even though, their beliefs did not adhere to scientific logic, the Smiths believed them wholeheartedly. The knowledge of some family beliefs and traditions was passed down through the family, and some of the superstitions can be seen today. My father still believes in the existence of spirits. The folklore of his childhood made him the man he is today. These stories are more than they appear to

be at first glance. These events and beliefs affect people. Many people think their family has no lore, but every family does. It's just not obvious.

Folklore tells so much about the people who believe it. Their hopes and fears can be seen in their stories. They believed in spirits because they thought there was something greater than them in the world. They believed in voodoo because it gave them more control over the uncontrollable. They practiced herbal medicine because it was a less invasive alternative to conventional medicine. They told legends about danger and money because they feared the unknown and desired more wealth. I can tell all of this by considering the deeper meaning of their lore. I now see my family in a brand new light. All of these stories are fascinating snapshots into a different time and culture, and knowing more about my family only makes me feel closer to my heritage.



The Persistence of Memory

Charles Mac Hamilton

As time keeps on flowing like a river towards my fifty-eighth birthday, I find myself becoming more and more aware of time, or maybe I should say, the lack of time. There have been so many wasted minutes, hours and years; and now I feel as if I have to make up for all of the years spent in the Wasteland.

At a time when many of my high school classmates are retiring, I'm now "re-inventing" myself. But I can't let go of some very persistent thoughts: Who really had more fun? Did (they) have the kind of experiences I was able to enjoy? What will they do, now that they have the time (and presumably, the money) to spend their time however they choose? Is this now their chance to live out the dreams of their youth? Or will they continue to live in the dread, and in the despairing doldrums that crippled their imaginations and verve; and melted their memories into what might have been?

Were they able to spend three weeks traveling around Europe in a rented car on two separate occasions? Did they enjoy the opportunity to live in New York City during the midseventies, see Roland Kirk at The Village Gate on New Year's Eve, and live out the dream of being a rock star? Did they get to travel

to forty eight of the fifty American states, in addition to some really heavy drinking and love-making with dark-skinned chicas in Costa Rica?

Dali's painting, "The Persistence of Memory," in which abundant ants, often interpreted in analysis as representing the female genitalia, ravish time; an interpolation of my history of the "serially monogamous," four marriages, versus the mundane, boring, sexless lives of my envious friends, who, along with their thirty year retirement parties, are also celebrating their thirty-plus wedding anniversaries. And the ants furiously anxious over the passing of time, impassively chasing their sexual desires and the fear of no more of them. It cause me to wonder if I, too, like Dali, have been a time-rapist, violating the precious moments where accomplishments and completion were the stake.

Dali captures my life, as if he knew the questions I would be asking in my advancing years. How did he know that I would wrestle with the advantages and disadvantages of the "softness and hardness" of living and aging, and the persistent memories of what shaped and molded me into the person I am today? I am his fading creature in the middle, dreaming of what might have been, unable to pin-point the exact time this creature began its form and composition.

And to my ex-wives, I am the despised monster whom

they fear. But then again, everyone know that monsters are mostly imaginary. Only unpleasant memories make them come alive and real to us. Like a Dali work of art, I have often been shocking and disgusting to many, and I have often bewildered those who were closest to me as well as those who viewed me from afar, at least those who were interested enough to notice. In the end, will I be simply a shadow of a rock, or a well-lighted tunnel through the caves of Truth?

And for the women I have left behind, I am a melting clock. I represent to them merely a dream to symbolize the passing of time of their individual life experiences. The melting of the watches compels me to think of whether or not that time in their lives produced any relevance in who they have become today, and even whether or not that time or experience holds any relevance whatsoever, in the grand scheme of things; not that I'm arguing for the permission or grasping for an advantage to live a life of hedonism. For as the writer of the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes, who opined that "all of these things I have considered, and have come to this conclusion; that life is but a mist, a vapor, and everything is but for the sake of vanity, and it is nothing more than a chasing of the wind, so I will eat, drink and be merry, and let the wind beckon me where it may, even if it blows me away."

One of these days, I will "go to sleep" as well. My questions

now are not so much about the dreams that I failed to achieve, or whether my family and friends dreams came true, but whether or not I will continue to dream forever, whether or not I'll still be on the clock, whether or not I'll be just another Daliesque fetus-like fish washed to an unknown shore, now decaying, after a lost struggle grasping for air. Whether or not I'll see sandy beaches with age sail boats on the Port of Lligat. And if the memories will persist on burning in my soul.

Or resting, knowing that I was never stifled while I could still hear the ticking, that no alarm could ever wake me again. And whether or not I'll still see the brown, yellow and blue. Or simply black.



Consciousness

Claire Nelson

Ok, slowly move my body, my arms, and my legs into a comfortable position. Close my eyes and take a slow, deep breath. Exhale. Relax my muscles starting from my toes all the way to my head. My feet are becoming heavy, now my legs, stomach, arms, neck, and I am still awake. Damn. Stay still, it's ok, I'll just think of a story to put me to sleep, no biggie.

Let me see, what story do I want to play out... The one where the guy is a part of a cult? No that's a bit too creepy, I don't wanna get paranoid and jump at little noises. Hmm, the story about the girl who turns into a fairy? Nah. The dragon story? Nope. The ghost story? Gah! I don't know, but I've stayed in this position too long. Time to switch positions. I turn my body over, place my one arm under the pillow, the other by my side, and one leg lifts. There, much better. Now, where was I? The story... whatever I'll just go with the cop trying to catch a serial killer, who is a supernatural being! Dun Dun Dun! I need to stop. Focus on the story.

She woke on damp ground, surrounded by a misty field, with trees circling the area. She was trying to remember what happened before she woke up, and how she got to this place. She remembers walking to her car after work when she heard quick footsteps behind her and then she was grabbed from behind with her arms forced behind her. The girl tried struggling but suddenly she felt a sharp pain in her neck... Where was I going with this again? Why am I thinking of vampires now? Is this serial

killer a vampire? Well, they technically ARE serial killers, undeadbloodsucking serial killers! Man, I still like vampires but they aren't taken seriously these days thanks to a certain franchise. I'm looking at you Twilight. I give up on this story.

I feel the need to check the time, but that means turning my body again and to shine a bright light in my face. Plus I have read somewhere that you shouldn't check the time when trying to sleep because it takes forever to sleep after looking at a screen... Whatever, I'm checking the time anyway. I swiftly turn my upper body towards my bedside table and reach my hand over, having to pat the top of the surface a couple of times before I find my phone. Pressing the home button I see the time is... 12:30? It has only been 30 minutes since I finally decided to lie down! Ugh, maybe I shouldn't have watched those last few episodes of Supernatural. Or checked my Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat. Thankfully no random dick pics tonight on Snapchat, that's a blessing from the Lord above. Oh, gross! Now I have the mental image of the one where it had the weird looking... Stop. No. Don't go any further! Think of something funny like cat videos or happy times like when that guy finally sat next to me in class! He smiled and said hello and his eyes had a playfulness to them. Oh, and his gorgeous, magnetizing smile; I think I could get lost in his face! Maybe he will sit next to me on Thursday. Thursday is a great day. It's the day before Friday.

It is also the day I have two science reports due, a psychology quiz in class, and I need a research topic for geology. Fuck. Never mind, Thursday is NOT a great day. Let's see, that means I need to write the topic and two reports by tomorrow night. Ladies and gentlemen cells of my brain; procrastination

at its finest! Woo, clap clap clap, cheers for more! Shit, shut off brain! Let us worry about this tomorrow, as for now; just go the fuck to sleep. Hey, Samuel Jackson, read that book. I wonder if I should listen to him read it to me on YouTube. No, just go to sleep, maybe I should try going back to the basics and count sheep! One sheep, two sheep, red sheep, blue sheep. UGH!

Keep calm, let's just do breathing and laying still again. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Good, now I'm calm, just keep breathing. Inhale. Exhale... My hip itches. Maybe I should, no. No, just ignore the itching, it is all in my mind, breathe and it will go away. Good, it's going away, almost gone... and Fuck it, maybe just moving my side against the sheets will help. Slowly now, lift the hip and lightly move it against the sheets. Nope, that didn't help. I'll just use the pads of my fingers. Slowly I reach my hand down and rub my fingers against the itchy part of my hip. Back to my breathing, inhale, and it's back. Damnit, means I have to full throttle for this. Again, I reach my hand down my side, and I vigorously scratch the itch until it is no more. I have conquered the battle, but the war is not yet over.

It's too warm, so I'll just move my leg some and find a cool spot. Now my other leg must find it's own cool spot. The arm under my pillow is asleep, and the other one is warm, I think it's time to switch 'em up! Now that's done, and this pillow is practically on fire. Flipping time! Ah, now I'm all set, let's get some shut eye. Well, not quite yet, my legs are warm again, and my arms, and my head. It's ok, just move them again. One leg bent, and out of the cover; the other straight, both arms under pillow, and my head turned to the side. There, that's perfect, everything is cool, I'm comfortable and what do you know; I'm like a damn toaster.

That's it, this calls for drastic measures. Time to turn on my back and lift the sheets! I grab the top of the sheets and flap them up, let the sheets slowly fall from their make shift balloon, and do that two more times. There, that is so much better. Now back into my comfortable position. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale.

You know, maybe I should start taking sleeping pills, but I don't know what will work on me. And since I'm a sophomore in college, I don't have beaucoup amounts of money laying around for different brands of sleeping pills. Hash tag broke college student. Hash tag what is money. Hash tag debt for life. Sorry brain, I'll stop. Wait one more; hash tag eat food not pills. What I should do is be more active in the daytime, eat healthy, and do my work on time. As a constant person who can't seem to get to sleep, I have done my fair share of homework and experiments. But that life is for suckers. I would rather eat some pasta and binge watch American Horror Story on Netflix when I get some down time. I should stop talking to myself before I go insane. Why couldn't I be like some of my family, or my roommate? They close their eyes and BAM! Guess who gets to go to the realm of dreamland! The damn sandman and I need to have a meeting about this unfair punishment, and hopefully this meeting ends with me knocked out on my pillow.

Oh, look at that, I'm yawning. Maybe I can go to sleep now and have wonderful adventures on Dream Island. I think I can do this, how bout a story to help me out. Hmm, what story could I tell myself? Ah, I know and it starts with "There once was a little boy named Blue..."

Sunlit Reflections

Non-Fiction - 2nd Place

Rebekah Broussard

Who was she-the girl reflected infinitely in the 360 mirror in a David's Bridal dressing room? She stared at herself for what seemed like hours. Frizzy and undone caramel hair fell over her shoulders and barely touched the white lace of her strapless gown. It never grew quite long enough and would always stay medium length. She couldn't help but tilt her head backwards, just slightly to make it feel and look longer in the countless reflections. Every girl was supposed to have long hair on her wedding day. It was rule number 3 according to the Wedding Rulebook that her aunt gave her at the bridal shower. Everyone knew about her passion for reading and extensive collection of books that lined the side wall in her bedroom, so of course she got a ton of books at the bridal shower-but that one book was the most unforgettably ridiculous. She sighed deeply as she remembered her stress at the bridal shower and how it matched that of the dress shopping. She lingered in the dressing room, tired of trying on dresses. Even so, she knew this 23rd dress was still not the one. How was the one supposed to feel anyway? At the moment, she wasn't even capable of such a contemplation. She could only dwell on feeling so lost in her infinite reflections. As she wondered about her various selves, she could hear the assistant approaching with her high heels and a clanging key chain that was kept wrapped around her forearm. She would never understand how someone could bear having such an annoying sound dangling around all day, but she graciously assumed that the tired, middle-aged

woman might fear misplacing her keys if they weren't obnoxiously tied to her arm. She decided that surely the assistant must eventually grow immune to the sound, tuning it out completely. She wondered what use it would be having those keys there if the assistant would only forget they were there anyway? It's extremely likely that the busy woman has totally forgotten that the keys are still jingling loudly from her arm, even if everyone in the entire dress shop definitely hasn't. What a strange fact of life it is for so many things to work the exact same way; forgetting something which is always there, is there, and only remembering that it should be there whenever it is not.

There was a small window above the right side mirror in the dressing room. Glancing into the sunlight reflected millions of times in the mirrors, she felt a clearing in her mind as this particular light was hypnotically reflected. She wasn't sure what made this light so special. She knew it was reflected that way by no magical means but only because of its natural inclination to the mirrors' multiplying capabilities. Nevertheless, these beams of sunlight somehow appeared to brighten her mind to new knowledge, shining a spotlight over the one thing in her life that she herself had become immune to. She had finally noticed that the melody of her delicate soul had gone stone cold silent. This revelation that is always feared—to lose something that was intentionally meant not to be lost-became the loss of her very own soul. In the remaining seconds of the clamoring silence in the dressing room, she felt the first tangible moments of doubt over her entire engagement. She didn't know who she was anymore because she had slowly lost the elegant tune of her soul among the racket of wedding planning. She took a deep breath in to break the

silence. She realized that she had never felt more lost than she did in this dressing room, staring into the infinite reflections of a stranger.

"Miss," the assistant was gently tapping on the dressing room door, "I think it's time to come out and show this beauty off!" She inevitably knew that the careless woman referred to the gown and not to herself.

"I'll be right out," she was basically whispering as the heat of tears welled up in her eyes. She had always been waiting her entire life for this very moment—the perfect dress, the perfect man, the perfect wedding day. It was all she ever cared about. But now that the time was here, she felt completely unsatisfied. How is it that she can have what was thought to be the greatest desire of her heart fulfilled and still feel so empty inside? Staring into the reflections again she realized one grand truth. Her dream of being married was only one great part of her first reflected layer. She had never before thought about the depths of her being or the various desires undiscovered in that trench. Each layer of her might seem the same, just as the infinite reflections appear identical, but in each layer is another world of desires and needs entirely. The deepest, farthest reflections that she could never see or even fathom by standing at the front of the mirror are the ones that contain those foundational desires never to be discovered by herself but instead only to be discovered in herself by something, or some One else. Complete satisfaction cannot be found in the shallow layers of this life, but the deepest layers of people—which are their very souls—can neither be easily accessed nor seen by themselves alone. She faintly remembers that these deep layers of her soul were once partially accessible

when she was a child—the tangible innocence of gracious love, sheer hope, and pure faith, all dancing to a beautiful beat. Since those feelings were once there, she was certain that they were not permanently lost but instead had merely gone silent; and since they were not lost but silent, she knows that she can and must find them again by seeking the Director of souls. The revelation of this marvelous triune between her reflected selves and the music and the conductor will be eternally unfathomable in all its glory.

As the glorious sunlight beamed over the paleness of her visage, she finally recognized the stranger in the mirror. This warm and symphonic light gently revealed her new identity as being wiped entirely clean into an expanse of white—much like that of the fabric of the dress which happened to be smothering her dainty frame. She smiled her tears away, overjoyed for the journey ahead toward the Conductor of orchestral souls.

The first steps of such an adventure were taken as she eased out of a hastily unzipped Vera Wang strapless lace ball gown—even if it meant she would never step into one again. She bounced back into her worn jeans and baggy grey V-neck. Vanishing from the dressing room, she darted out the dress shop door. Each step she braved was padding out a rhythm toward the crescendo of her trumpeting soul.

Ridiculous

Katie Rayburn

When you think of marriage, what do you see? Do the two cake toppers standing perfectly posed come to mind or do the flowers blooming artificially all over a room fill your senses? Do you see cloth running down an aisle in pastel colors, pristine and unwrinkled but made for the sole purpose of being tread upon? Do you see empty chairs sitting patiently for family and friends to take their places as the suspense of time and expectation steal the tranquility from the air? Do you see the ridiculous atmosphere of all of this?

It is ridiculous, all of it. Money is spent in the thousands on fleeting treasures. Silverware, flowers, decorations, food, music, clothing; all these things last less than a day but cost months to pay. Beauty is bought, sold as traditional values and necessities. We have only the best on that special day, including elaborate displays of wealth. The occasion is so complicated that an outsider is hired to keep the flow fluid while the prices rise even more. The young and dumb are taken advantage of and are told that all of these tiny details will make the magic of the whole affair for a cost completely unreasonable to bear.

And yet, here is a thriving industry centered around the idea that this love will last forever despite any examples saying otherwise. A cynic would say all of this was pointless. A realist would say all of this could be accomplished on a budget. A pessimist and an optimist would have differing opinions as well on whether this ceremony was beautiful or painful, but it hardly matters. Every person will have a different opinion, a different idea. Everyone will see their own traditions or unorthodox wishes, locations depending on their desires, what outfit each person will be wearing, and of course who will be standing up there next to them. We all see someone different.

I see my best friend. I can see him standing there in the distance,

rocking from his heels to his toes, almost bouncing in place. I chuckle, knowing he does that when he is nervous but also excited. His smile is visible as well, never wavering, only widening. Even from the long expanse between us, I catch his eyes staring into mine, and we both smile. This one is different than before. We are laughing on the inside at a joke no one else seems to get. As I slowly approach the designated area for us to stand together, it has become impossible not to laugh. We both giggle, finding everything—all the things I don't see in my idea of marriage but all the things people find essential for weddings—just so ridiculous.

I see us face to face with our hands clasped. This is the most natural thing in the world to us, and the connection between our fingers isn't puzzle pieces that finally fit. It isn't two pieces come to make a whole. We are one amazing masterpiece with two brushstrokes finishing our grand design. His hands are warm, and I know he thinks mine are cold. It's already understood. He'll say something about my hair; not that it looks good or beautiful or amazing or perfect. He'll say I look like a poodle or something else equally absurd, and we'll laugh harder. He won't understand either that the "white" dress is actually ivory or eggshell or some other color that's white but apparently not. I won't understand either, and we'll joke about that later.

I can see the moment the preacher has to hush us in order to start the ceremony. If that doesn't make us burst into laughter again, we might actually keep with the schedule someone else has already planned. The preacher will be a friend though, he'll know that secretly we are just kids at heart, and he'll let us enjoy our moments. When the ceremony actually starts, I can see us glancing at one another, finding all those excessive words and phrases boring. I can hear the preacher describing love or marriage in his own words, and I can see myself thinking that this is too long winded for my taste.

When all of that is done, the preacher will tell us to recite vows. I can see this part only vaguely, something about in sickness and health and death do us part, but I also imagine a set of different vows. I can hear something tailored more towards us,

but my imagination cannot find the exact words. What I can see, however, is how we say "I do" in unison, with our pinkies crossed because that's just who we are and symbolizes what we hold most sacred. The trust we place in one another isn't held together by religious laws or legal matters. Our trust comes from us, knowing that the other person will be honest and open with anything and everything. All we need is a pinky promise and our love.

I don't see what happens afterwards. I don't need to. I've already seen enough silly things to know that more will follow, and I know we will be laughing and joking through the rest of it as well. For years after, we will still be laughing. We'll talk about how everyone was leading up dramatically to that moment years ago, when we only saw it as an inevitable stepping stone on our journey. All of it was so ridiculous, having this huge ceremony just to tell us what we already know.

And when I think about marriage, it isn't some grand event to say we've reached a new point in our life. It's just me and my best friend doing what everyone expects us to do. It's me finding that person that I'm going to continue my journey with, sharing in everything I have and will have. It's him, standing beside me, ready to laugh with me, cry with me, and pick me up when I inevitably fall. It's us laughing, laughing at all the flowers and decorations and cake tasting that will all taste the same. We'll be laughing.

We'll be laughing because it is ridiculous that we need all of this just to tell us something we already know, that we are going to be together forever:



A Visit From Ivan

Non-Fiction - 1st Place

Kevin Pearcey

We're on the porch. Me, my Dad, and my friend Nathan and we're standing around one another drinking beer in the late afternoon, and already the sky is turning dark. Yet, the wind is gentle and pleasant – the calm, they say, before the storm – because out in the warm water of the Gulf, Ivan is coming. We're hundreds of miles from the coast, but that doesn't matter; we're in its path and Ivan has become Terrible.

We joke. We talk. We drink all of the beer, and Nathan's phone rings. His wife calling. The town is quiet. In whatever manner, people are getting ready. Nathan lives in a trailer in the country, but they are sheltering in a home here with his in-laws because a hurricane can play kick the can with a trailer. South of us the horizon looks like God got happy with the black crayon.

Dad collects the empty beer cans into a garbage bag. We have had a good time.

Be safe, we say. Be safe, Nathan says back. He drives off in his gold Mustang. Dad takes the garbage bag around back of the house to a trash can.

We stand on the edge of a vast uncertainty.

Ivan feeds off the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico and then feeds on lower Alabama. It makes landfall near Gulf Shores as a Category 3 hurricane, and we watch the weathermen on TV stand in yellow rain slickers in the belly of that great beast and try to tell us what's happening over the swelling sound of wind and rain.

"I wonder why they do that?" my mother asks.

Because we do not turn the station, I think.

Ivan wreaks havoc on the Gulf awhile before it begins its slow ascent into the Heart of Dixie along the I-65 corridor. They say the eastern side of the hurricane is the worst; where the heavy winds are. Ivan has been gusting at upwards of 160 miles

per hour.

We are on that side.

#

Earlier in the day, I had watched my mother wrap cherished pictures in heavy plastic. Photos of my grandparents, of her brothers and sisters, family albums, birth certificates, insurance policies on us all. She places them in a blue storage tub and tops it with a matching lid. Youthful conceit causes me to momentarily question this precaution, but it vanishes when I see that her and my father are genuinely afraid.

"We just don't know," my mother says.

#

My parents fret about the pair of large pecan trees in the backyard. Rain has heralded Ivan's arrival for days. The ground is already soaked, yet Ivan has so much more to give. How threatening water can be in great quantities, to snake in among the roots of trees and await the hammering of Ivan's winds. We have raked their dried leaves on fall mornings and gathered their pecans for pies and for selling, yet Ivan is indifferent to their placement in our lives. We fear not their loss more than their proximity to our home. So much depends on how twisted their roots have become with Mother Earth. So much depends on how fast the wind blows.

So much depends on God. Or good luck.

#

The lights are out. We have candles and a flashlight and are together in the living room with the radio on. My parents have a little Shi-Tzu named Lincoln who begins trembling at even the hint of thunder; so, anticipating the anxiety Ivan will bring they have given him a dose of sedative to calm him. He lays on a pallet oblivious to what the wind and rain is doing outside. I think we all envy him.

In preparation for the near-certain power outage, we loaded coolers with sandwich meats and cheese and drinks. We also have a variety of chips and fun size candy bars and water. To irritate my sister, in a good-natured way, I snack on Snickers and leave the wrappings scattered around on the counter in the dark

(she hates that for some reason).

The battery-operated radio offers us reports on Ivan's movement. The eye is here. The eye is there. The eye is moving northwest at a speed of. The eye is just east of the city of. For my father the eye of the storm is not moving fast enough. After continuous updates that place the eye in the exact same location, he yells, "Damn! It's been there two hours!"

#

We hear a crack. Then a thud on the roof. We all look at one another.

We get up to investigate. My father and I each have a flashlight. I go to check the bedrooms.

In the darkness there is some comfort in knowing the layout of the rooms. I shine my light against the walls and doors and skyward to the roof searching for holes, stepping around the furniture I already know is there. I move from my parent's room and into the room beside it. This had been my first bedroom when we moved here twenty-five years ago, but my mother had it converted to a second bathroom years ago. My light flashes across the shower curtain. I can still see my little single bed there, in that corner where the tub sits, and me under covers, surrounded by plush animals with a nightlight on showing the room familiar because I was so afraid of the dark.

I move through the next door and into my now-bedroom.

The slope of the ceiling is lower here, and I race the flashlight across it. The rain crackles against the windows. There is thunder and a few bolts of lightning. Out of curiosity, I go to the far window and look outside.

There is nothing. Blackness and just the vague outlines of shapes I recognize. Ivan has blotted the moon, but the lightning helps. The big pecan tree next to my room is still standing, bringing me some small comfort, but I know the night is still long, and Ivan's wrath is not yet satisfied. In a burst of lightning, I glance towards the roof outside my window and see the long limb sticking over the edge.

At least it didn't come through, I think.

"Daddy," I call, "I think a limb has fallen on the roof."

The bobbing of a flashlight precedes his arrival. I show him, and he presses against the window pane. He waits for the lightning.

"Uh," he says.

I follow him to the kitchen where my sister and mother have gathered with candles flickering along the countertops, casting shadows around us.

"I'm going go out and take a look," he says.

"What is it?" my mother asks as my father finds his windbreaker.

"A limb it looks like," I tell her. "But it hasn't come through."

"Be careful," she tells my father, who passes us and opens the backdoor, the wind and rain roaring before he shuts it and descends the back steps. We wait near the door and listen for a few long minutes before we see his flashlight returning.

The door rattles open.

"It's the tree," he says.

"What?" we ask.

He explains: The other pecan tree, the one nestled beside our garage, has been uprooted and fallen across the backyard, barely missing the house, with the exception of a few limbs, like the one I saw poking over my bedroom window. The tree's roots have ruptured the concrete foundation of the garage and have now lifted it, cocking the garage on an obscene angle.

We allow this information to float over us for a moment. The tree beside my bedroom still stands ominous. We all feel a sense of dread as Ivan is still blowing up hell, and we do not know if the worst has come or is still yet to come.

My mother becomes sick. She rushes to the bathroom.

#

Day breaks. The rain still comes in sheets and the wind tosses broken limbs down the front of our street, but there is some solace in the daylight, in being able to actually see the world around you. In the backyard, we can see full-scale what Ivan has wrought. The old pecan lays like some felled, giant, mythological creature, limbs crushed beneath its own weight. Its long and heavy roots stretching out like tentacles to grasp and

toss the garage. I think of a Kraken come to shore to terrorize.

When we first moved here, my father nailed a basketball goal over the garage doors. We spent hours playing. When we played H-O-R-S-E, he would go behind the now fallen pecan tree and somehow make a long basket by shooting the ball between two of its tallest limbs. After a few games, the iron basket would begin to sag from the old wood, jarred loose by repeated shots, and we'd have to nail it back again. The basketball goal is long gone, but I still see the faded spot on the wood where it once was.

The wind, I think, is blowing in such a way that if the other pecan tree goes it will fall away from the house. I try and comfort my mother with this knowledge. She is unsure. My father and I take turns watching the outside, passing each other like sentries on lookout. He goes to the front, I go to the back. He goes to the back, I go to the front. My sister and mother generally stay put. Lincoln, in his drug-induced condition, slumbers peaceably. Periodically, we check on our automobiles, parked in the large church parking lot near our house with no trees or power poles around. My father's foresight certainly was accurate in this case: had one of our cars been parked in the garage it would now be lifted and entangled in the Kraken outside.

I lay an empty Snickers wrapper across my sister's arm, and she squeals.

#

Before lunch, there is the tell-tale crack and a loud thump. I beat everyone to my bedroom to look out. The other pecan tree has fallen, away from the house and across the barbed wire fence that separates our property from a vacant field. Its roots have ripped large chunks from the green earth leaving an ugly muddy maw. We stand at the window and take turns looking. My parents are visibly more relaxed now. My mother looks down around the fallen tree and sees an overturned garbage can and the shiny reflection of numerous beer cans scattered there.

"Did y'all drink all that beer?" she asks with a hint of displeasure in her voice.

"Nathan did," my father and I answer.

Mom (Obituary)

23 April 2016 - Nicholas Jones

She was born on June 1, 1942—when her country was at war. When she was only five, she backed into a space heater with her raincoat on—and parts of her skin were disfigured as a result. In spite of this, she was still just as radiant and beautiful on the outside as she was inside. She grew into a beautiful, remarkable young woman. When she was 25, she was told she had ovarian cysts. As a result of this, she had a hysterectomy—and was left physically unable to have children. For a woman who never bore children of her own, she raised many. These include, but are not limited to, numerous siblings, nieces, nephews, and godchildren. She spent their entire lives teaching them right from wrong, love from hate, and respect from indignity.

Her name means, "Famous warrior. Renowned fighter." She exuded strength, loyalty, passion, love, and what was more important to her than anything else on this earth, faith. Jesus was her savior and through him, she lived her life as an angel on earth. The world was never as dark nor the clouds ever as grey, whenever she lit up the moon and placed the stars in our sky, so our nights didn't seem isolated. With her on our side, we always knew we could find our way home. Because ultimately, home is where our hearts are, and she held them in her hands. She had a way of making us feel impenetrable. As if we were warriors as well. She broke bread in Houston, danced in New Orleans, held hands with strangers in Baton Rouge, sat on roller coasters in Orlando, saw Dr. King address the nation in 1962, she knew why

the caged bird sang from the words of Maya Angelou, and she made her home in Shreveport—where her legacy continues and will continue to thrive forever, through the people whose lives she changed. She spent her life persevering, never letting anger or spite work its way into her heart. She gave and gave, even when she herself had nothing. She had every reason in the world to be angry, but instead she saw the perversity of life for what it is, that within the struggle lies the joy. She lived as an example of this sentiment, from the day she was born, up until the moment she drew her last breath.

Louise "Wheezy" Bass passed away earlier this afternoon, on April 23, 2016, surrounded by loved ones. She was 73 years old. Her soul has ascended into heaven, where she now sits with her parents, her brothers and sisters that passed before her, my father, and her Heavenly Father. She has expanded her heavenly wings and is flying through the clouds, above the children she left behind. She feels no pain, she holds no grief, and she's never going to want or need for anything else ever again. I'm sad that she's gone and I'm going to miss her terribly, until we are reunited again—as brother and sister. But until that comes, I will reflect on her life as a celebration—a monumental achievement, a testament to the good will of man, the positive aspects of human nature, and the love between a mother and her son.

I love you, Mom.

Aconstellations 2017

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